

**SHOW THEM THE WAY
TO GO HOME**

Oh, show me the way to go home,
I'm tired and I wanna go to bed ;

The rest of the words were the unprintable, ribald yearnings common to all home-sick troops, and Margaret stood listening to them as she waited at the tiny railway station for transport to Dustypore, the Indian hill-station where thousands of men awaited repatriation or new postings. Fresh from England, this was her first assignment as a welfare officer—a job which produced almost as many personal problems for a girl living in a huge camp of men as the matrimonial troubles it was her duty to alleviate.

Her personal troubles began in the make-shift cubicle they called a bedroom the night she arrived; her official problems began the next morning for she was the first welfare officer the War Office had sent there and her reception was influenced by a not unnatural but most distressing scepticism. This is the story of Margaret and the men among whom she lived and worked, of their troubles and her solutions, of her troubles and how she surmounted them; a novel with an obvious background of truth; a story to touch the heart and excite the imagination; a story full of situations, both tragic and humorous, requiring the wisdom of a Solomon and the understanding of a woman.

SHOW THEM THE WAY TO GO HOME

MARGARET PRATT



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For my friends •

the British Other Ranks and their Officers
and their friends,
the unsung heroines of an
organization called
S.S.A.F.A. •

FOREWORD

This book is based on fact, though every character and every incident is entirely fictitious. There is no place called Dustypore in India and no reference at all is intended to Deolali, where British troops did indeed muster for repatriation.

It is a story of the British Army, with a battleship or two lowering in the background and the occasional sparkle of wings overhead. The main theme is wartime conditions in India, and battlefields are not mentioned, as such. The offensive here started on the home front, and the shots which registered in the hearts and heads of the B.O.R.s and their officers came, not from the enemy, but from the girls they had left behind them. Of that immortal foursome, blood and tears and toil and sweat, the blood is entirely absent. The tears and the toil are there and so—very much so—is the sweat.

The quotation from the song 'Show me the Way to
go Home' is reprinted by permission of Irving
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Chapter 1

Their voices said 'Good luck, mam,' but their tones and their faces plainly added, 'God help you; you'll need it!'

They shouldered their kit and, with a cheery half-salute, all four were gone, swallowed up in the whistling, jostling wave of olive-green-clad figures which surged around me. The train jolted, clanged and gathered speed to throb importantly out of the tiny station, rear lights twinkling gallantly until the darkness smothered them. The last few heavily laden soldiers swirled round the doorway at the further end of the platform and drained through. The very last one of all paused to blow me a cheeky kiss and then he, too, was gone.

Apart from the troops and myself, no other passengers had alighted. A dozen or so Indian coolies had swarmed into the carriage when the train stopped, to fight a wordy battle over my luggage. The four victors and I were now alone on the platform. They squatted on their haunches, a few paces away, chewing betel-nut and hawking and spitting noisily, dull eyes fixed expectantly on me. They chewed and they spat, and the betel-juice came out of their mouths in curving streams, staining the rough boards with red smears like blood. I moved further out of range.

Outside the station, sharp commands and loud guffaws merged into the noisy revving up of lorry engines. As the first lorry roared off, the occupants burst into song, which became a rousing chorus as the others followed.

Oh, show me the way to go home,
I'm tired and I wanna go to bed;

The rest of the words were unprintable ribald yearnings common, I supposed, to all homesick troops. This bunch didn't seem to mind whether I heard what they were yearning for or not!

The singing and the lorries went together into the darkness. The station was utterly silent. If no one had been sent to meet me, after all, the sooner I made a move out of this place the better. There must be a ticket-office somewhere, even though trade wasn't brisk. Motioning to the coolies to follow, I walked down the platform and reached the exit doorway just as all the lights went out. Heavy breathing down my neck was ample assurance that my cohorts were in close support.

'Taxi? Is there a taxi outside?' I spoke hopefully into the darkness. It was a question I should have asked long ago, of course.

'*Nai hai, memsahib. Gharri nai hai, memsahib.*' That meant no, presumably. Hesitantly, hands outstretched, I groped forward until sudden scuffling noises ahead halted me. A match scraped and a tiny flame shot up and instantly died. One outstretched hand closed round something knobbly as the second match flared. The match-lighter and I stared at each other.

'Oh!' I hastily released his bare ankle. 'I beg your pardon.'

He inclined his head in grave acknowledgment and carefully lit a stub of candle with the matchstick. Still sitting cross-legged on the wooden counter, he fixed the candle in a little pool of its own spilled grease and listened as I explained.

'I'm the new welfare officer for the British troops up here. I came on that last train from Bombay. Someone was to meet me. Has a message been left? Could I phone to the camp from here, please? Or get a taxi? Could I speak to the station-master; perhaps he knows about me?' Surely I would get one 'yes' out of all that. •

'Station-master is me, please.' Sitting in full cross-legged authority on his own railway counter! Just like that little ivory image which had pride of place on my Aunt Katrine's mantelpiece at home! 'Memsahib warrant ticket, please?'

I handed it over and he scrutinized it carefully, back and front. Satisfied, he made a dignified descent on the further side and peered at me over the counter top.

'Please to wait, memsahib.'

I supposed he had gone to make inquiries. The coolies waited impassively and the candle-flame sent our five shadows rippling grotesquely up and down the walls. A jackal coughed and barked derisively and the challenge was taken up by the dogs of the Indian village nearby. I leaned my elbow on the counter and decided that Charles, my brother-in-law, had been quite right. 'Dustypore? Of all the dumps! The sooner you can get yourself posted back here the better.' Isabel had laughed. 'Margaret a welfare officer! I can hardly believe it!'

I could hardly believe it myself, now. But it had seemed to be such a good idea, at the beginning. Less than three months ago! Isabel's letter had started it. '... and even if the war ends this year, we can't hope to leave India until next year. It would be lovely to have you out here with us. Can't you wangle a passage somehow or other? After being years with the Merchant Navy Shipping Pool, surely ...' She had added

as a postscript: ' . . . unless, of course, there's something special keeping you at home? Am I being brutal or tactless?' But I had 'nothing special' to make me anxious to stay in England. Isabel was my only sister and our parents were dead. The two main difficulties had been my job and the passage out to India. Aunt Katrine and I had talked it over. She lived in Surrey, in a village called Clandon, and I spent most week-ends with her. 'The Pool can't release me, unless it's to do more important war work. And all the shipping lines have the same story: their passenger lists are full up with priorities, for months ahead.' Aunt Katrine had listened, unwrapping some sausages from a sheet of newspaper and then smoothing out the paper, absently. 'Joining Isabel is the most sensible idea you've had for a long time, Margaret. I've been wondering when you'd wake up and begin to take fresh interest. Four years since Peter was killed and yet you—' 'Please . . .' I had stopped her. I did not want to discuss my husband with anyone; I only wanted to forget him. She had stared down at the newspaper, flattened out on the kitchen table, and sighed. 'So you'll keep on at that job, never giving yourself a chance to meet anyone.' She meant a chance to remarry, and I had smiled. 'I meet plenty of men in my job.' 'Distressed British seamen!' snorted Aunt Katrine. 'With wives in every port already.' Then suddenly she had bent down, with a finger pointing. 'Margaret! Listen to this! "Ladies wanted to train as Welfare Officers to serve with British troops in India, Italy and the Middle East. Age over 25 and under 50. Apply . . ."' I had read it too and then shaken my head. 'Welfare! I'd be no good at it. You have to be born with it in you, like nursing. And this newspaper's ten days old, anyway.' 'If you won't write for particulars, then I'll do it for you.' My aunt could be a despot. 'This is a more important war job. A passage to India, new surroundings, everything new and strange and interesting. This is Providence . . .' and her eyes had positively sparkled behind her spectacles.

Everything new and strange and interesting! This arrival fiasco should satisfy her. Nothing had really gone right since yesterday morning, when our boat had docked at Bombay and I had stepped ashore with my nineteen colleagues. Isabel and Charles had been waiting on the wharf, but there had been no time for more than a brief 'Hullo'. Isabel's face had been a study, as she watched me being hoisted up into the back of an army lorry by a grinning soldier and being trundled off, holding on to an iron bar with one hand and waving to her with the other. She and Charles had followed behind in their car, to

Military Headquarters at a place called Colaba. But then I had begged them both not to hang about waiting, I would telephone as soon as I could. We had come ashore about seven in the morning, and it was after six in the evening before I was free to make the promised call. Charles was in the Indian Civil Service, and it would be pleasant to live with them and sink deeply into their happy family life. Isabel had mentioned Peter only once. We had tiptoed out of the nursery, where Glenda, aged six, and Nick, aged four, and Meggie, aged three, lay rosily sprawled in their cots under mosquito nets. 'You're lucky,' I had murmured, and Isabel had tucked my arm through hers affectionately. 'I—we never met Peter, and somehow that seemed to make it worse—when we heard . . .' No, they had not known Peter, and for me that would make living with them so much simpler. '. . . been married seven years, but you had so little time, Margaret. How I've hoped that perhaps that made it easier for you.' My thoughts had raced wildly at that. Did Isabel know? How could she? Even Aunt Katrine had no suspicion of the truth, shrewd as she was. Only Peter and I knew, and he was dead. Easier? Bitterness or something must have shown on my face. 'I won't ever mention him again, I promise,' Isabel had whispered.

The jackal and the dogs had stopped their noise. Where on earth was that station-master? Surely he wouldn't leave the station and go personally to fetch someone? Those four soldiers in the train had asked me about transport and I had assured them my arrival was expected.

The train had stopped at what was evidently a busy military depot. Troops laden with kit had dashed up and down the platform, packing themselves into every compartment except mine and the other empty first-class carriage next door. Leaning out of the window, I had watched them trying to force their way into carriages already crammed full, and I had signalled to the nearest one. He dropped his kit and came running, at once.

'Tell some of them to come in here with me. There's plenty of room. Hurry up; that was the first whistle.' The lad had gaped at me, then dashed away. He shouted, 'We're to pile in back there.' Four men had come staggering along. They had grouped themselves awkwardly in the carriage, with mountains of kit round their feet, as the train moved out. A sergeant, on the platform, sprang forward as we passed. I waved to reassure him.

It had been tough going at first, with these captives of my

bow and spear. They sat down in a row facing me. First-class railway compartments in India were roomy affairs, with long seats which could be used as beds fixed under the windows and a private bathroom and shower. Dust seeped in everywhere and the vicious whirring of the little ceiling fans sent it in cloudy waves along the floor.

'At home it's drips from umbrellas, out here it's dust,' I remarked, and that broke the ice at once.

They had never heard of Families' Welfare. 'This some new stunt of the War Office, to put back repatriation?'

'Of course not. Don't you think it's a splendid idea? Sending women welfare officers all over India? We're going to interview any soldiers, sailors or airmen who have home troubles and get things straightened out for them. Isn't that a good scheme?' But they had not been impressed. The War Office, to them, was a department which specialized in raw deals for its employees.

'Most of us has money troubles,' volunteered the one the others called Clinker. 'Does this Families' Welfare hand out any dough?'

'Yes. But not to you; we hand it out to your wives and mothers at home. When they're really up against it, that is, because we haven't got a lot of money. You chaps are supposed to come into my office, tell me what is bothering you at home, then I send an inquiry to my London H.Q. and they get in touch with your local visitor. Every town and village at home has one of our visitors—somebody well known and respected, like the doctor's wife or the padre's wife. Someone like that. The visitor helps and advises as much as she can, and I get a report of what has been done. I pass the report to your Commanding Officer and he reads it to you. That's all straightforward and simple, isn't it?'

'There's kinds of trouble——' Clinker had begun and then paused. 'It's no job for a lady like you, mam.' That had been the first time I heard the name which was to become more familiar to me than my own. Mam! It was shorter than madam, less formal than captain and more friendly than Mrs. Michaelis. My friends the B.O.R.s had words to cover everything.

'Being a lady has nothing to do with it,' I had told Clinker, warmly. 'It's having sympathy and understanding and a genuine desire to help that counts, surely?'

'Ye-es. But there's cases I knows about——' He had rubbed his chin. 'You wouldn't want to have to listen to some things . . .'

'S'right,' one of the other three chimed in suddenly. 'Tub Christie's wife. She——'

'Shut your bl—— big mouth, you.' Clinker had been quite fierce for a moment. But they had showed me all their photos and shared their travelling rations with me: meat sandwiches laced with raw onions. The onions had given me hiccoughs.

'We're a homeward-bound draft, mam. Us lot that got on the train. Dustypore first and then home. Over four years of it out here. What's it like at home? It don't hardly bear thinking about, women with white faces all over the place.' I had been startled until they explained. None of these four had had a chance to speak to a white woman since they came East. Not really speak, as they put it. Just a word with nurses in hospital or over a cup of tea in a voluntary canteen. I was their 'first'. 'They're snooty, the white women out here.' Clinker was bitter. 'Memsahibs they call themselves.' But I couldn't imagine Isabel being 'snooty'.

My hiccoughs had died down to spaced singletons when the train slowed and halted. We had all peered out through the mosquito-meshed windows, but could see nothing beyond the corridor of light thrown out for a few feet on either side. 'Dustypore all right. It'll be pitch black until the moon rises,' and they had stacked my kit, neatly. Nervousness had made my teeth chatter and I had set my jaw firmly to stop such an exhibition. Clinker had smiled and handed me his water-bottle. 'Wipe it first with your hanky, mam. Best thing to settle your stummick. The pahni's chlorinated.' It had been tepid, evil-tasting stuff.

And then we had reached Dustypore and here I was, still waiting for that station-master. Or rather, he was waiting now for me, because I had been idly counting six dancing shadows on the wall for the last minute or two. He was standing at my elbow.

In the normal vertical he was less impressive: a thin little man, with a white *dhbati* (sheet) draped round his thighs instead of trousers and a collarless shirt with the tailpiece flowing free. His feet, bare at our first encounter, had been thrust into sandals with upturned, pointed toes and he had added a purple-and-green-striped waistcoat and a peaked cap. I could hardly believe this was all happening to me.

'Please you follow, memsahib,' and we passed out under an archway into the Indian night. 'British *Armee*, there.' He pointed dramatically into the distance and turned to take his leave of me. I seemed fated to lay violent hands on this little man. It was his arm I gripped this time.

'But didn't you make any inquiries? I thought you had gone to make inquiries or phone someone?' I almost shook him. But he was politely shaking his own head and pointing to his shoes, his waistcoat and his cap. All he had been doing was putting on his official uniform, to escort me with fitting respect under the archway,

The coolies came to my aid. Perhaps they wanted to get off home and saw no prospect of it, in my employ. They clustered round him, jabbering, gesticulating, and he indignantly jabbered and gesticulated back again. The luggage lay abandoned at my feet. The din grew. The coolies wore themselves out from the waist upwards on my behalf. Sick at heart, I peered around. Surely something British would materialize soon. There were thousands and thousands of troops billeted in this area, but apart from a very faint light almost opposite where I stood and the glow from the candle behind, all was dark. And far too quiet. Oh, for the sound of a British voice!

The light opposite suddenly brightened as a door opened and a figure stood outlined.

'Whit the flamin h——s gaun on oot there? B—— off, ye sons of b——! *Chupperow! Jow! Jaldi!*' A British voice at last! And it sounded like the British *Armee* too. The door was slammed shut.

The little station-master was plucking at my sleeve, timidly.

'British *Armee* there.' His voice held triumph and reproach, as he pointed the direction once more.

'I'm sorry, I didn't realize you meant a particular spot.'

The coolies hoisted my kit up on to their heads and, with beaming smiles, waited for me to be their spearhead.

The owner of the vocabulary pulled open the door at my knock and then stood to attention, his jaw sagging.

'Good evening. May I come in a minute, please? Perhaps you can help me?' and I went into the hut. Another figure scrambled off a camp-bed in the far corner and stood stiffly erect, while another jaw sagged. 'I'm the new welfare officer and I came up from Bombay on that last train. There was no one to meet me. I don't know what to do now.'

'Ye wis on that train? An' ye've been hangin' aboot oot-side? This is the R.T.O.'s office, miss. We wis'nae telt tae expect ony buddy special. I'm the corperil in chairge. I'll get on the phone tae Sub-Area and let them ken ye've arrived. Gie the chair a wipe first, Tam.'

While he used the phone—an affair of earpieces and much activity with a little handle—I turned to Tam, wiping the chair

for me busily. An electric-light bulb dangled from the roof, but the hut was lit by the wan glow from an oil lantern and the flicker of two candles. The 'corperil' had been playing patience when interrupted, his cards set out on a board table between the candles. 'Are the lights always switched off around eight o'clock? Surely you don't need a black-out up here?'

'Yessir. Miss. No, miss.' Tam rubbed his big hands on his trousers. From the convulsive jerk his Adam's apple had given when I turned to him, it was plain I was dealing with a very nervous character. I tried again.

'Dustypore isn't a bit like what I expected. Those two platforms with no seats—I thought it would be a big, bustling place with heaps of military police fussing about. . . .' The Adam's apple went up and down in sympathy. Behind us, the 'corperil in chairge' seemed to be getting results. 'Yessir. I'll dae that, sir. . . .'

I resumed my own one-sided conversation and the apple worked overtime in gallant response. It was a relief when the earphones went back into their little box and the 'corperil' made his report.

'A caur wis sent tae meet the train, miss. I'm tae wait ten meenits afore I phone up again. Ye're tae be pickit up syne in the duty truck.'

'That's splendid. It's awfully hot in here, I think I'll wait outside.' That Adam's apple badly needed a rest from small talk. Its owner would probably rather be alone while he got it stabilized again.

India, waiting for the moonsoon rains to break, was always breathlessly sticky, Isabel had told me. The candlelight seemed to make the atmosphere even more oppressive. The moon was rising at last behind distant palm-trees and, across the way, the station buildings were beginning to stand out with a sort of cardboard effect. The coolies lay against the hut wall, fast asleep. Naked except for scrubby loin-cloths and soiled out-sizes in turbans, they looked pathetically top heavy. Their bare limbs glistened. This was the romantic East. . . .

'Gie me Paisley ony day o' the week, miss.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I wis jist sayin' gie me Paisley ony day o' the week and ye can keep yer romantic East.'

'Oh, I—was I talking aloud?'

'Romantic muin! I'm fair seeck scunnered o' whit they ca' the romantic East! Romantic bletherskite!'

I asked again about the lights, to change what seemed to be a sore subject for this practical Scot.

'Oor offis is connectit tae the station wirin'; it's mair convenient. The nex' train's no' due in till midnight.'

'You mean the little station-master has to switch off all the lights until midnight? But can't he leave yours on?'

'Yon wee s—— among the meal beds doon on the coonter. He disnae hae tae switch off onything, but argee-bargeein' oot in India gets ye naeplace. This welfare, miss, whit's it tae be? Fitba' buits or bigger doses o' this ENSA?'

'Fitba'——? Oh. No, nothing like that. That's a different branch of welfare altogether. This is Families' Welfare,' and I explained.

'Ye'll hae Tam in tae see ye, then. His wife hed a bairn tae anither man. Ane o' thae Poles o'er there.'

I looked round. 'Which——?'

'A Po-lish so'jer. Tam an' me wis in hospital thegither when she telt him. Jist efter Kohima. Him wi' a bullet in his airm an' me wi' ane in ma leg.'

'Kohima! But that was ages ago!'

The 'corperil' looked at me. 'Aye.'

'But didn't he apply for a compassionate home posting?'

'Aye, he did that. He's still here, tho. He's gaun hame wi' me sceeven weeks cum Thursday tae be demobbed. Baith o' us is C3. The bairn's in an orphanage and the big saftie's gaun tae adopt it, if they'll gie him permission.'

'What about his wife?'

'She's deid. If they'd let Tam gang hame——' He broke off. 'Ye'll dae yer best fer him, miss? He wants the bairn and he'll be guid tae it. They've telt him he's no' whit they ca' a proper custodian.'

I promised. My London H.Q. would straighten out Tam's affairs.

'I'll tell the ithers aboot ye. Pienty o' them need a' this help an' advice. It's a big job ye've ta'en on, miss.'

Our instructress had told us that, too. She had put us through the six weeks' training course on a Commando scale, mentally. '... your job is vital to post-war Britain. Your common sense and tact must be used to straighten out every kind of marriage tangle. There will be far too many broken-up homes and marriages when this war is over, and most of the trouble caused by the long separations. Go all out for reconciliation. Women and children whom you will never see will be depending on you. This is a worth-while mission, ladies. You could call it "Operation Reveille-to-Marriage".' She had not thought much of me as a recruit to welfare, though. A few days before sailing I had called in at

London H.Q. to get my identification pass. I had knocked down a pile of cards and bent to pick them up. One with my own name had lain uppermost and automatically I had glanced at it, at the words written in red ink: 'TYPE. Definitely not the welfare type. Highly unlikely to conform to army discipline. Impulsive. Too individual and quite unable to take the requisitely detached view. May get results but not by orthodox methods. NOT RECOMMENDED.' One of our Chiefs had been sitting at the table as I had replaced the cards. She looked at them and then at my face. 'I'm sending you out all the same,' she had said quietly. 'I think you should do well. Good luck.'

The 'corperil's' voice, cut through my thoughts. 'It's time that caur wis here, miss.'

'Is it far to the camp?'

'Twa-three miles tae the nearest yin.'

'This place is the very back of beyond, just trees and dried-up earth and the road stopping dead at the station. Aren't there any houses near here?'

'Oh aye. They're a' ta'en o'er as Messes fer the officers. Naebuddy bides here bar the airmy. Nae civvies——' A sudden rattle-clatter in the distance cut him short. We listened. 'Yer caur, miss.'

The coolies were on their feet again, laughing. 'I ought to have paid them off and let them go home. Do we still need them?'

'They'll bide whether we're needin' them or no. In amang oor feet.'

Tam came out of the hut and we all lined up expectantly as, with a falling dustbin-lid effect, the 'caur' went round the station yard in a dust-raising swoop. A sergeant crawled carefully out of the rear door and the Indian driver, in flowing shirt and *dhoti* and wearing his cloth cap with the peak rakishly pulled down his neck, hopped nimbly out by the front door.

'Evenin', miss.' The sergeant straightened up to salute. 'Sorry you've had to wait about; we had a bit of trouble with the car,' and then he was glooming over the luggage and scratching his ear. My kit was modest enough: a steel uniform trunk, a cabin trunk, a suitcase and a canvas hold-all. The coolies had balanced the lot on their heads with ease. I pointed this out to the sergeant. 'It'll be a tricky business,' was as far as he would commit himself.

The car itself was unco-operative. It had the stripped, bleached look of a skeleton; probably it had already been retired to the scrap-heap when the easy profits of wartime scarcity had forced it rustily back into circulation.

There was no helpful luggage-rack. 'Why not rope something on to the roof?' I suggested.

'That roof's so rotten it splits if you swear.' The sergeant was quite short. He'd probably found that out on the trip here.

They made a start, however, and it was clear almost at once that the sergeant had known what he was talking about. Four loose bricks supported the driver's seat. Tam smashed two of them straight away. The driver moaned aloud, then hastily searched through his garments and produced a neat little book. '*Chitty munta*,' and he pushed the book into the sergeant's fist.

'He wants a signature for the damage. You'll have to sign for the bricks and give the car's number, miss.'

'Sign for the bricks?' I echoed.

'This isn't army transport. It's the taxi-contractor's property. We hire it so much the hour. Chargeable to welfare this time,' he added with childish satisfaction.

'Do you mean to say that my Delhi H.Q. will get a bill for two smashed bricks?'

'They'll have to be charged to welfare, miss. They can't be stopped off of him,' and he gave Tam a very nasty look.

The front seat alongside the driver's was steady enough, but it was already overflowing with the spare wheel and two tins of petrol.

'Take that lot off of there,' ordered the sergeant, and there was an immediate protest from the driver. His resistance was active, and the 'corperil' and Tam removed him along with his spare wheel and tins. 'I'm not pinching the stuff,' roared the sergeant. 'You can collect it tomorrow. TOMORROW—HERE—COLLECT—NOT PINCH—SAVVY,' but it was no use. He had to give in when the garments were searched again and the little book came forth. The wheel and the petrol tins were replaced. The driver gave them a loving wipe with his shirt tail.

'You bl—' began the 'corperil' and stopped, eyeing the roof, not me.

That left the rear portion of the vehicle for all practical purposes. The sergeant pointed to the large round drum of oil on the back seat, the driver yelped and that was that. The movable floorboards were our Waterloo, though. Five thin planks laid loosely in. The 'corperil', wrestling with the steel trunk, went through them first. He handed the broken one to his sergeant. Tam, noting that the sergeant's hands were already full, laid his splintered offering at the sergeant's feet.

'We ought to turn the car inside out and shine the lamps to see what we're breaking.' It was a feeble joke, and I was only

trying to ease the strain a little. But sergeants don't pause to query, they pass on all suggestions to the proper quarters.

'You heard the captain,' he began menacingly. '*Jump to it!*'

'I'll fetch out a candle,' I promised and was able to beat a retreat into the hut. Men should be left alone sometimes.

When I rejoined the party, the sergeant had reduced his team to spectator status. All by himself, he was carefully easing the steel trunk through a doorway. I held the candle in through the opposite door and he was looking up to smile his thanks when some of the hot grease dripped down his open-necked shirt. Nothing paused after that. There was a crash and a thump which shook the whole structure. It continued to shake crazily as the 'corperil' and Tam and the driver laboured to extricate the sergeant without actually disobeying his furious monologue. The coolies hopped about like performing fleas and the little station-master switched on the lights and came hurrying over. It was his head, with peaked cap, which came up through the car roof. I saluted it. Nothing less fitted the situation.

'I hope you're not hurt?'

'No, miss.' The sergeant, with some little delicacy, had turned his back on me, to peer down his shirt-front.

'We'll start from the beginning again, then. It should be easier without those floorboards.' It was.

The sergeant and I sat in the back seat. We braced our feet against a cross-bar under the front seats. The station-master lent us his blanket, to lay folded across our legs and ankles. The steel trunk was placed on top of the blanket. The cabin trunk sat on the oil-drum. The sergeant and I leaned our heads against it, one either side, to steady it. He held the suitcase on his lap, I had the canvas holdall.

'That trunk's gey heavy fer ye when ye gang o'er bumps.' The 'corperil' was practical to the last. I was able to wave through the hole in the roof as we bounced out of Dustypore station.

Dustypore had roads—good smooth roads. But we left them far too often to take short cuts across virgin prairie with the tree-stumps left in. An idea suddenly struck me and I laughed aloud. We had just sailed over a stump on the sergeant's side of the premises.

'I'm not going to wear any of this stuff tonight. A lorry could have picked it up tomorrow. I'm an idiot!'

'Is that so, miss?' He was a martyr to asthma; I could feel it blowing all round. In case it embarrassed him, having to puff, I kept the conversation going.

'You didn't think of it either, did you? Will that contractor man really send a detailed account to my Delhi H.Q.? I filled up pages, with bricks and floorboards and roof fabric and side-stays. My colonel will never believe the bricks were in the car to start with.' Highly unlikely to conform to army discipline! Impulsive! No requisitely detached view! May get results but not by orthodox methods! This would all fit in, and I hadn't been an hour in Dustypore yet.

The stump was on my side this time and the jar started up my hiccoughs. The sergeant left me to it.

The car shot to a violent standstill, with a jerk which would normally have sent us through the windscreen. We were safely anchored, though, Sarge and me, in the rear seat. The cabin trunk had fallen off the oil-drum. This was the hotel of Dustypore and I was home. Not right away, of course. Even when the luggage had been eased out by a smiling Indian 'boy', we still sat on in that back seat. The agony of restored circulation and excruciating pins and needles in our legs and feet held us watery-eyed and helpless. The anxious 'boy' ran off to fetch the manager, and the driver tried to coax us forth, pointing first at me and then at the building behind.

'*Bungalow hai, memsahib, bungalow hai.*' He kept on at it like a parrot.

This man beside me, this saintly sergeant of the British Army, did he not know any words suitable to the occasion? The roof was in ruins already. I would have accepted his apologies graciously afterwards. Couldn't he manage even one word, to express my feelings for me suitably? I wronged him, of course. I heard him, a few minutes later, when the car had borne him off and then broken down ten feet from my door. He knew two words. All the pent-up fury of his nature came forth in those two very short, sharp words.

Hiccoughing, with the tears rolling down my cheeks, I was helped out and staggered up the three steps, the Indian manager, gallant, on one side, the sergeant, grim, on the other. They laid me on a chair. Oh, Aunt Katrine!

'Transport will call for you tomorrow, miss, at nine hours.'

'Oh, not again! I'd rather walk. That thing out there! Can't I just walk? Please, Sergeant?' Surely we were comrades by now?

'It'll be an army truck, miss. You was a special tonight.'

The manager was an Indian and a pleasant man. This 'suite' was booked for me. This 'boy' would wait upon me. My bath would be ready in five minutes. Dinner was being served in

the dining-room. He would personally be on the look-out for me, to show me to my table. This was civilization again. I almost purred. Relaxed, in a warm bath, I could forgive Dustypore for its reception of its new welfare officer.

Chapter 2

Dustypore was an Indian hill-station, a second-class Indian hill-station. British troops had known and cursed the place for generations. The climate was bearable, after the heat of the stifling plains, but not nearly so cool as Simla and others in the higher-level bracket. Two thousand or more feet above sea level, it took its stand on a wide flattish plateau, hemmed in by a skyline of hill-tops with the most fantastic shapes and distortions. Not a tree or a bush or a blade of grass could find a foothold on their harsh, stony slopes.

The troops lived in tents and *bashas*, erections of plaited straw reinforced with wooden posts. The *bashas* were almost rainproof and fairly cool; winter in Dustypore was hotter than any English summer. Each camp and depot boasted a brick-built Headquarters block, fashioned like a long row of horse-boxes with the roof extending to make an open veranda. District Headquarters, known as Sub-Area, was slightly more elaborate. It was built in a square; brick walls with windows on the outside and all doors opening on to the veranda running right round the square inside. There was even an attempt at a garden inside this square, but the lizards far outnumbered the flowers.

There were no streets with pavements and no shops. All shopping took place in the Indian bazaar. The roads, tree-lined for the most part, ran straight from place to place; they were built up higher than the surrounding dusty earth, with ditches on either side to drain off the monsoon floods. Little wild donkeys scampered merrily over them and placid buffaloes paced heavily along them. The bazaar, with its satellite Indian village, stood well away from all the camps, and at times of plague, cholera and other infectious scares could be placed out of bounds to the troops.

The hospital, military and families', spread itself to let each ward stand apart, amid great ancient trees, which cast cool, dappled shadows. The nurses and the orderlies rode to and fro between the farthest wards on bicycles; Matron and the doctors went the rounds in jeeps.

Only a few bungalows had upper storeys; these, Indian-owned, had been rented in peacetime to European families escaping from the furnace conditions in the plains. All had now been requisitioned as Officers' Messes or living quarters, and no civilians set foot in Dustypore. The Officers' Club and the solitary hotel catered for the social side of garrison life in a hangdog manner. The main hotel structure, a ramshackle building with dingy white paintwork, housed the dining-room; two little rooms, one on either side, were cocktail bars, cloak-rooms or spare bedrooms, according to the need of the moment; the kitchen was at the rear. A dusty carriageway swept up in an elongated horseshoe, past iron railings on the left, to the main veranda steps, then out again, with the manager's office-cum-bedroom and a row of huts on the right. These huts, four of them joined together, provided the bedroom accommodation proper. The centre of the horseshoe was divided between patchy lawn, flower-beds and three really magnificent trees. Here, each evening at sunset, and sometimes until sunrise, the officer fraternity gathered for drinks, almost on my front doorstep, my hut being the one next to the manager's. Beyond the railings across the way, a Chinese restaurant waxed fat and prosperous, on British stomachs escaping from army catering. Two very fine iron-scroll gates gave entrance to the hotel. These had not been closed in living memory. In fact, the gate-posts had long been removed or rotted away. The gates had sunk, rooting themselves in the hard-baked earth. Intruders could either walk through them or round them.

My 'suite' had a tiny front veranda, with a small bedroom and bathroom behind. Sitting on the veranda, I could see and hear all that went forward on the lawn. In return, the lawn community could see and hear all that took place on the veranda. It could be closed up, of course, this veranda. The door opened in two halves, as all right-minded doors do in India, and the lower iron-railed portions on either side of it had wooden shutters. The four small windows of the upper parts were frosted glass. It became a ticklish choice in the evenings; whether to sweat it out in Turkish bath privacy or sit it out, cooler, but very much in the public eye. The huts were built up off the ground level to the height of the three front steps and the general effect was like being in an aquarium or in a shop-window in Oxford Street. From the veranda, a door led into the bedroom. The flooring throughout was of rough-hewn stone and the corrugated-iron roof had a most unique ventilating system; a clear space had been left all round between roof and walls. Through this outlet, rats and sparrows came and

went with complete impartiality. I grew used to the sparrows. A score or more went to bed on the rafters aloft nightly. They went early enough to bed, but they were not early risers. The chest of drawers with the cracked mirror stood in just the worst spot, but there was nowhere else to move it. Dressing and the little matter of make-up were hazards for me. Sooner or later, all my possessions bore, or had borne, the sparrow trademark; I was licked from the start. But I never grew resigned or indifferent to the rats. My friends the sparrows acted as sentinels, their flutterings were warnings and signals; all too often, when I came home late at night, a little torn bundle of feathers lay red on the floor.

The bathroom, a mere cubicle, was walled off in a corner at the back. Standing on a chair, one could look over the wall into it or vice versa. The fittings were primitive: a cold-water tap set in the wall at waist level, a tin bath in which one could kneel but not sit and a tin mug hanging on a jutting-out brick. Petrol tins of warm water were carried in through a back door in the bathroom itself.

An iron bedstead with mosquito poles occupied the other corner of the back wall, and the space between bed and bathroom was filled in by a window with opaque glass panes and stout iron bars. There were no rugs or curtains, but the bed was furnished with two cotton sheets and a pillow, stuffed tightly with unginned cotton, to give a teakwood resistance.

Nothing seemed to have been added or altered since the Indian Mutiny, and even a Spartan might have flinched.

However, I guessed nothing of all this as I sat on the veranda this first evening, waiting for the pins and needles to die down and the hiccoughs to die out.

The sergeant and the Indian driver had pushed the car down the drive and disappeared through the gates. The lawn in front seemed to be full of khaki-clad men, sitting at little tables. There was not one woman amongst them. They must have watched my most undignified arrival, but no one would think ill of a welfare officer. It was a pity I had had to come up here at all, but there had not been enough of us in the first batch out from home to cover every military station. No one had been posted to Bombay as yet, and it was understood that when more officers arrived out, one of them would be sent to Dustypore and I would go back there. A few weeks, at most.

Cans rattled in the rear premises and a voice called loudly, '*Guzal tayar hai, memsahib.*' My bath was ready. Rising to my feet gratefully, I stretched, turned and fell headlong over the canvas hold-all.

The two young officers who helped me carefully to my feet were solemn and solicitous. I hiccupped twice in the process. Onions! Nevaire no mo'ah, as my friends the B.O.R.s would have put it! The two of them steadied me and tried to urge me back on to the chair.

'Take it easy,' one of them had the impertinence to advise me. 'You'll feel better sitting down.'

'Perhaps a cup of strong black coffee——' the other suggested, and they raised eyebrows at each other. I had had enough of this Dustypore and its nonsense for one evening.

'I'm going to have a bath,' I said flatly. 'Would you mind——?'

I was closing the door into the bedroom when one of them turned back and came up the three steps again.

'Excuse me,' he began. 'Er, excuse me mentioning it but we thought you ought to be told. There are tents just outside your window at the back.'

'Are there? I'll shut the windows. Thank you very much.'

I had a good look round the 'suite'. It was depressing. There were dozens of tents at the back, glimmering in the moonlight. The nearest was less than six feet away, but there were no soldiers about the place.

It was the bathroom which really shook me. The back door had no bolt or lock inside. A short length of thick rope, pulled through the wood and knotted at each end, served as the only handle. Women and privacy were not catered for in this hotel. Clinging grimly to the inside knot, I did not linger in the little tin tub. The door on the bedroom side had a bolt. I used it, but it was a mere formality. Anyone who felt like it could just pull open the back door and hoist himself over the wall. What a place! No lock on the most important door and a bolt on a door which could be jumped over! Someone with a strong sense of humour must have fixed those stout iron bars on the back window.

I was heartily sick of uniform; it had brought me nothing but trouble so far. There were sure to be other women over in the dining-room and they might even be in evening dress, but for tonight my blue linen dress with high-heeled white shoes would be good enough. I brushed all the dust out of my hair, until it shone again.

The 'boy' took me over to the dining-room and the manager placed me at a little table for two against a wall. The room was full of men—laughing, uproarious men. Not another woman, after all! Whenever I glanced up from my plate, I met the interested gaze of masculine eyes, summing me up, doubtless.

Their new welfare officer! I felt marooned. They didn't mean to be rude, these men, but my hand began to shake. I endured the soup course, lasted out with the fish and then hurried out.

The lad who had warned me about the tents rose from the lawn and intercepted me as I hurried down the driveway.

'It'll be stifling hot in your room. Why not come and sit out here for a bit?'

He had been very decent. After all, it was part of my job to get to know all these officers as soon as possible. Our instructress had covered that point thoroughly. '... no private life of your own. You must mix and put a good front on the business right from the start. You'll have to cut out blushes and modesty. You can't afford to be embarrassed or look embarrassed. You must be completely impersonal and keep sex on a clinical level. You've got to be women of parts. You'll need the hide of an elephant; the constitution of an ox; the cunning of a serpent; the heart of a lion; and far more patience than Job. You'll have to learn to talk with brass hats and use the common touch; you'll have to dance with B.O.R.s and discourage familiarity; be affable in Officers' Messes and stay stone-cold sober; you'll hear plenty of bad language, but you've got to be deaf; you're there to sympathize with the lower ranks but not to endanger discipline; you've got to put fresh courage into broken-hearted men; a sense of humour will be a help, but glamour will be out of place; and you've got to be good listeners without having your time wasted. You'll please men sometimes, but very few women at any time. You must know how to type and run an office with efficiency. If you act hard-boiled, you'll be misunderstood, fatally misunderstood. If you act half-baked, you'll be no use at all. Steer a middle course. In short, ladies, you must endeavour to create an atmosphere around yourselves in which Cæsar's wife would seem like a prostitute and yet you must not be prudes. If you bear all this in mind carefully, you will be of some service to the fighting men overseas. Now, are there any questions, ladies?' No one had questioned her, and here now, in Dustypore, was my chance to start putting on 'a good front'. I had dashed out of that dining-room, but I must start 'mixing' on this lawn.

More officers joined our little group. 'Do you realize exactly what sort of stuff you'll have to listen to?' asked one—Ron, the others called him. 'I shouldn't have thought a girl like you——?' I must be giving the wrong impression all round, perhaps a half-baked one. The instructress, Isabel,

Clinker, the 'corperil', the sergeant and now this Ron, all of them seemed dubious about me. I must veer over to the hard-boiled a little. More than a little. . . .

Ron walked over to my steps with me. 'A broad-minded woman in Dustypore,' he began and then grinned down at me. 'Er, your husband, out here, too, Mrs. Michaelis?'

'I'm a widow,' I said shortly. That was all Dustypore needed to know about my private life.

He studied my face. 'I see. . . . Well, good-night—or rather, *au revoir*?'

'*Au revoir*,' and I watched him stride back to the lawn. Rather a nice man—though the others had called him Ron, familiarly, it was plain they respected this tough-looking major. A useful contact for a beginning!

I was brushing my hair and cooing to the sleeping sparrows when the gentle knock came. The light was off on the veranda but it was so hot I was leaving the place open until I was ready for bed. Before I could reach it, the bedroom door was quietly pushed open and Ron came in. This was a situation which called for a good, hearty scream, but I couldn't have uttered a sound though my very life had depended on it. Everything inside my throat was dried up with sheer amazed shock.

'They're still at the Club.' His head jerked at the wall. 'Look, I'll give you fifty rupees. That be enough for you?' Then, as his eyes travelled, 'God! what a figure! Bet you'll teach me a thing or two I didn't know!'

Fury brought my voice out in a thin squeak. 'Get out of here at once! I'll yell if you don't!' Would anyone hear? I remembered the tents and backed to the barred window. Ron was quick, too; his palm closed over my mouth before I could touch the window.

'You little fool! You don't want *them* in here. I'd be finished and so would you. Keep your mouth shut, I'm going.' He turned back at the door. 'No one saw me come in. I went off with the others and then nipped back here. You'd better look to make sure there's no one about now.'

I pulled on my dressing-gown and went out on the veranda. A *tonga* was just turning in at the gates.

'There *is* someone out there—you can't go out,' and now I was just as anxious for him to stay as I had been for him to go. In fact, I leaned against the closed bedroom door, to stop him. He was quite right, if anyone saw him leaving my 'suite' at this hour, my welfare career would be ended before it even got started.

Ron leaned against the bathroom wall, staring at the floor, with his hands thrust deep in his pockets. Two cheery voices outside argued about who should pay for the *tonga*. 'Coming in for a drink?' invited one. 'Thanks, no. Could have sworn I saw a woman on that veranda there as we came in.' 'Wishful thinking! Better watch your step if it takes you that way! Well, good night. . . .' 'Good night.' Subdued whistlings, a chair scraping on the floor, sundry bumps and then a dull thud just through the wall and a muttered 'C——, it's hard' and, finally, silence. We still stood, waiting, and outside another sound grew and swelled, jerky, harsh.

'What is it?' I whispered.

'Frogs,' Ron whispered back. 'You'll get so used to them you won't notice them.' Frogs! Like the 'corperil', I was beginning to be 'fair seeck scunnered' of the romantic East.

'Have another look outside now.'

'What about the other one? There's three rooms——?'

'It's empty. Those two are Staff chaps down from Delhi.'

Nothing moved outside. I couldn't see the moon, but its light took all the colour out of everything and left ghostly greyness. I went back and nodded to Ron. 'All clear.' But he hesitated, looking down at me.

'I thought you were hinting—out there tonight. You were so free and easy. A woman with your job . . . you seemed to know it all. I'm sorry. But we're starved men up here in Dustypore, and you—you'll have to be careful. Some of those others out there got the same idea. I couldn't wait. I was crazy to be first . . . I'm married . . . and the married men miss it most.' His low whispering paused. 'I must have been crazy . . .' and then he was gone.

Two Staff chaps from Delhi! Cæsar's wife?

My knees shook!

Chapter 3

There must be a less violent method of getting soldiers on their feet, at crack of dawn, before they're even half-awake. Who wakes the buglers themselves? I almost asked the specimen standing a few feet distant, with his cheeks bulged out and his starboard eye swivelling in my direction. But the roar of cheering completed what the bugles had begun and I woke up properly to where I was: standing at an open window in my nightdress, with my long hair hanging in plaits, while hordes of

men in ever-increasing numbers poured from a glut of tents. Also, if the War Office issue pyjamas to their troops on active service, none of these warriors had claimed their quota. I sank down beneath the sill and groped feebly through the bars to reach the windows. The two windows were pushed gently shut from outside.

Dustypore's shock tactics for female welfare officers were off to a flying start. Crazy officers on the front doorstep last night, ready to overflow into my bedroom at the slightest nod or wink; a nudist camp on the back doorstep first thing in the morning. Everything strange and new and interesting! Providence at work on my behalf!

The bugle-notes slapped against the walls and ran shrilly down every groove in the corrugated-iron roofing. The sparrows whirled overhead in agitation and then began to settle back cosily on the rafters. I could do something about them, at least. It took a lot of clapping and shooing to despatch them out in search of breakfast. One absolutely refused to leave; bunching up its feathers in a huff, it turned its back on me and took a flyer's revenge. I was still speechless with indignation when the front door went into noisy action. The 'boy' had arrived with *chota hazari*.

A *mali* (Indian gardener) was watering the flower-beds in the front garden. We exchanged cordial salaams and then I carried the tea-tray back into bed. There was a lot to think about. This morning I had to report to that Sub-Area place and be given office allocation. A sister welfare organization had already posted one of its officers to Dustypore; she had been here for some three weeks. Her organization dealt with a very different aspect of welfare: post-war resettlement and careers, not family troubles. I must find out where she was billeted and get some hints on procedure. If she had managed to find more secluded lodgings, perhaps she would let me share with her until my transfer came through. . . .

Somebody tapped my shoulder gently. . . .

Every hair on my head rose on its own goose-pimple, the tray wobbled on my knees and the tea slopped. I sat still, I hadn't the courage to do anything else. Not a sparrow and surely no B.O.R.—?

The tap was repeated, and then my head was gently scratched. This was too much. Cup and saucer at the ready to throw, I turned round. A little monkey was sitting on the bed-rail. It leaned forward and shook me by the hand, politely.

My heart was beginning to have a lot in common with that Adam's apple of Tam's. I doubted if it would ever be out of

my mouth long enough to get settled down to straightforward beating again.

The monkey shared my biscuits and accepted tea out of the saucer. It snuggled down cosily under the sheet and stared up at me with bright eyes. The little collar round its neck was engraved with the word 'Run'.

A dog began to bark outside. Run listened, head on one side. Then he shook my hand again, grabbed the last biscuit off the plate and was off, over the bathroom wall. Through the window bars I watched him skipping along the ground and almost expected him to turn and wave to me. I noticed then the huge dog sitting at the door of a kennel some distance away. It was chained and it rose up slowly, eyeing the little monkey. The soldiers had all gone.

'Run, come here, Run,' I called. That dog looked fierce; it might bite. But Run went ahead fearlessly. I dashed out of the back door and there was Run, squatting right down beside the dog, feeding it with the biscuit.

I found out later that the monkey and the dog belonged to a sergeant. He called them 'Tip' and 'Run'. When he was on duty, he chained one or the other, never both, and they guarded each other. Whichever was loose stayed within sight of the kennel. Run would sit on Tip's back and search for fleas; in return Tip would gently lick the little monkey.

One of the very saddest things in Dustypore was the partings between the soldiers and their pets. These little animals, usually strays, attached themselves to B.O.R. masters and marched with the regiments. It was only at Dustypore that the partnerships had to end. Free space was allocated on every homeward-bound ship for a certain number of pets and the men drew lots for these passages. A few paid passages were also available. But more pets had to be left behind than could possibly be taken home. They were handed over to mates, who were in turn repatriated, and the animals changed hands once more. It was a sad business.

'Could I have some coffee and toast over here, please?' I asked the 'boy' when he brought back my shoes. I could not face that dining-room again this morning. The events of last night had left me neither trustful nor comfortable. There was a hit-or-miss atmosphere about this place. I was anxious about the transport arrangements. Perhaps the driver would not be able to find the hotel or would make a mistake about whom he was to pick up. 'Relax, relax,' I told myself. 'Give him an hour's grace to allow for mishaps and after that hire a *tonga* to get to this Sub-Area.' The *tonga* chap would be sure to

know where it was. The officers all seemed to ride around in these *tongas*; little carriages, just like dog-carts. Three passengers and the driver sat back to back, under a cotton awning. The truck arrived punctually, though.

'Good morning. You had no difficulty in finding the place, then, or me, either,' The driver stared incredulously, as if I were making fun of him. But he said nothing. What a simpleton I was! There was only one hotel, there was only one of me and all Dustypore knew of the events of last night. Even the patients in the hospital knew. Except one event, though I wondered and worried about that, after I grew to know my Dustypore.

We swung through the gates and camp after camp went by until I grew muddled with all the names the driver recited. He whistled softly between his teeth and I chatted of this and that, anything and nothing much. I had never been one of those bright, competent souls who took everything in their stride, but now I had to learn to make all these soldiers feel at ease with me. When we turned in at the gates of Sub-Area this lad spoke a whole sentence, his first, apart from the names of the camps.

'I ain't had words with a white woman for over three years.'

He hadn't had words with one now, in any sense, but I saw what he was trying to convey. He helped me down.

'Could you show me where to go? I forgot to ask the sergeant last night.'

'Try the Orderly Room, mam. That second door there.'

I tried the Orderly Room. Half a dozen B.O.R.s gaped at me while I stated my business to the nearest. The staff at these Sub-Area places always had a disdainful, Smart-Aleck approach to life. However, Smart Alecks were as lesser men when it came to controlling their womenfolk from a distance of eight thousand odd miles. Dustypore Sub-Area found their way into my office, in due course, just as did all the other camps.

I was conducted round the inner veranda to my first encounter with a Staff officer. He was brusque. He did not bother to get up and he did not invite me to sit down. He just sat and looked at me, while I told him who I was and what I had come for. Then he stared down at his table, fiddling with his pencil.

I cleared my throat and started off again. 'Of course, I should like an office in the very centre of the camps, but I must content myself with what is available.' I tried a light laugh here and waited. He still sat, doodling with his confounded pencil on the blotting-pad. This was awful! Should I sit down

and join him in the doodling business? I should have to carry the chair over from the opposite wall.

'My truck driver is waiting outside. Could you direct him where to take me? If you are too busy yourself?'

The doodling went on apace, a Hampton Court maze of squiggly lines. If it had been noughts and crosses, I wouldn't have minded waiting until he was finished. Placing both hands on the table, I leaned across and spoke up very distinctly. After all, he might be rather deaf and unwilling to admit to his frailty.

'My B.O.R. driver has just confessed to me that he has not spoken to a white woman for over three years. He feared I might think him an unmannerly boor. Perhaps you are out of practice, too?'

That brought his head up. A handsome face, but on the sulky side. Rather red, too. 'Office accommodation is scarce. In fact, there's none to spare for you. You will have to share with ENSA. They don't use the room much. In the canteen. Your colleague—a faint sneer here—'is there already.' He took his cap off a peg on the wall and a school-master's cane off the table and stalked out.

I followed. I certainly couldn't afford to have a temper in the army. He strode along the veranda at a terrific pace and I hurried behind, almost running. The driver, smoking a cigarette amongst a little group, hastily squeezed it out when he saw us. The Staff captain whished his cane through the air and jerked a finger.

'Welfare transport?'

'Yessir.'

'Canteen.' Without more ado, the S.C. swung himself up into the spare front seat. What about me? Where was I to sit? If this had happened a very short time later, I would have known how to cope with the man and his rudeness. He would have found himself and his little cane at the canteen, minus his handmaiden. But for the present I was still acting the raw recruit, with a lot to learn.

The driver unfastened the wooden board at the back of the vehicle and stood waiting. It was too high. I couldn't step up, and I wasn't going to squirm up on my stomach. Desperately, I looked at him. He smiled and held out his hand, groom fashion. I put my foot into his hand and was lifted up. The board was re-fastened securely. There was no place to sit except on the low sides, and it would be just my luck to be jolted overboard! The only other thing to do would be to lean against the back of the cab. I had not minded standing up in the lorry driving through the streets of Bombay; the others

had been with me. But standing up in the back of a lorry with them was a very different matter from being driven along the roads of Dustypore, like a solitary prize pig going off to market.

As the lorry started off with a jerk I sat down on the floor and hoped devoutly that the journey would be short. I nearly howled, too. If all the other officers in Dustypore were like the two specimens I had had dealings with so far, either too amorous or too surly, it would be open warfare from the start. We had all been warned in Bombay that we were on our own wherever we were stationed, to work out an amicable plan of campaign and get results. Not the kind of results I had been achieving so far, either! Our instructress had dealt faithfully with every point except this one: how to cope with officers who were not gentlemen. Perhaps she had thought it would never arise!

The lorry stopped. The S.C. was out, waiting impatiently. We walked across a bare stretch of ground, to a new-looking red-brick building—the B.O.R.s' canteen. An office here would be ideal, if only I need not share with ENSA.

The room was small and bare, divided into two by a matchboarding partition. The size did not matter much, but to get to me the B.O.R.s must either cross ENSA territory or, vice versa, ENSA must cross mine.

'Well?' The S.C. was impatient.

'I'm sorry, but it won't do. I can't honestly be anywhere near ENSA. It would make my job a farce.'

He shrugged. 'Better try it out before you make up your mind. ENSA rarely use it, and the Ladies' Committee meetings are only held once a month.' Ladies' Committees as well! I must get something better than this, for the sake of the girl who would take my place up here.

'Those visits of ENSA and the committee meetings are almost sure to take place at the worst times.' Big, nervous Tam and others like him! 'Rehearsing a comic turn or having a *résumé* of the amount of buns eaten are all right in their proper place. But not when a heart is breaking.'

The S.C. was openly jeering now. 'All this sob-stuff is being rather overdone, don't you think?'

'I don't know. I'll be able to tell you a month from now, perhaps. The War Office sent us; you'll have to tell them if you don't want us. No, I don't like this room. What do I do now? About getting another one?'

He shrugged. 'You're supposed to take what you're given in the British Army.'

'Isn't there some kind of form I can fill up?'

'You can send me your official refusal, stating reasons. In triplicate.'

I remembered then his remark about 'my colleague' being in this place already. I would go and talk it over with her.

'She's here somewhere. I'll send your transport back for you,' and off he went.

The canteen had been planned on generous lines; it sprawled. I walked right round it, but every door was padlocked. I looked in every window I could reach up to, but there was no sign of this other welfare officer. I banged on several doors, just to make quite sure the place was empty. It was obviously not much use hanging about here. The only figure in sight was a soldier, standing at the cross-roads further along. I could ask him to direct me, to tell me the way to go home, to that hotel. It seemed a dreary place to go back to, now, with nothing to do but wait for something to turn up. The whole idea had been that we should be received by a British Army eagerly awaiting our coming, ready and anxious to deck us out with offices.

Angrily, I kicked a stone along the road and glanced across at the row of low buildings on the left. 'WELFARE' said a little signboard hanging out of one doorway. I jumped the ditch at the roadside and steered straight for it. Mecca, at last!

The open veranda running along the front of the building was deserted. Each door was padlocked. I looked through the upper glass pane of one door, a bedroom obviously. Only the door marked 'Welfare' stood open. It seemed an omen.

I marched in, thumbs crossed, head up, and did not know until I peered into the cracked mirror later that my face was smeared with dust from the lorry floor.

The young lieutenant inside took his feet off the table and came round it to meet me. 'Are you looking for someone?'

'No, I'm looking for somewhere—an office I can call my own.'

'I say, you must be the new lady welfare officer from home. We've been waiting for you; there's about thirty chaps queuing up for your arrival in our camp already. I told them, better mark time until you could take them over. You'll know more about it all.'

'If I can find a place with some privacy to listen to their troubles, I'll start in right away. You haven't got an office to spare, have you?'

He didn't think so; this was only one of the camps. His H.Q. block was round the corner and he had been given one of the

officers' bedrooms in this block, to make a start. 'I don't know much about welfare myself, actually. I'm here for three months before repatriation so I took the job on,' he confessed. 'But you've got an office. In the canteen. Our lads are to report to you there when you get settled in.'

'With ENSA,' I said wearily and added that I had refused to be settled in. This chap couldn't do anything to help, and it was no use moaning to him about the Staff captain, who was, after all, his superior officer. I went out into the sunlight again.

The military policeman at the cross-roads knew all about me, too.

'That's the hotel, across that waste ground there and through the gap. That's the back entrance.'

'It's awfully quiet. No troops marching about, nothing on the road at all.'

'Sometimes there's nobody, sometimes there's everybody. Sometimes the trucks pass here one to the second, sometimes just one to the hour. That's the way it is, mam.'

I remembered my own truck.

'I'll tell him where you are. He'll have to pass here. He'll have to report to you, though, to be signed off in his book.'

Across the waste ground, through the gap. And in by the back entrance. Another omen, perhaps?

Chapter 4

The hotel was deserted, too, when I went in through the back entrance. Just the shabby, dirty white buildings and the dusty garden brooding in the glare. Too much company this morning and none at all now. The army did all its chores at the same times.

The windows and shutters of my veranda were all open, but the front door was stoutly padlocked. 'The 'boy' had not expected me home so soon and he had forgotten to hand me the key this morning. The manager's office was closed and padlocked. The dining-room was empty. It seemed much smaller this morning; little tables set round the walls and one long table running down the centre, with potted palms on it, spaced out with correct precision. I went into the kitchen.

The *mistri* (Indian cook) was sitting on the stone floor, peeling potatoes. He rose at once. 'Salaam,' said he and politely cleaned his nose, with finger and thumb, through the open window. The huge stone ovens were built out into the

room. Soup bubbled noisily over one furnace and naked flames shot in spasms out of another. Two tree-trunks had been pushed through gaping holes in the stone-work and the floor round the stove was inches deep in grey wood-ash. The whole atmosphere reeked with acrid wood-ash dust, because there was no chimney. The petrol tins for the bath-water lay carelessly stacked against the garbage bins in one corner.

'Is there anyone——' I began and stopped, to watch three large cockroaches scuttle across the floor and take refuge among the heap of peeled potatoes lying on the stone flags. The cook rose nobly to the emergency. He placed one huge, bare foot flatly on each of the offenders, wriggling his splayed toes amongst the potatoes to get a better 'squash' stance. I left hurriedly.

I climbed in through a veranda window. All this would make a most amusing story for Aunt Katrine, but I didn't feel like writing about it just then. I looked at my watch. Only a quarter to eleven; two hours to fill in before lunch. It had been foolish to go into that kitchen—the food had tasted all right at dinner last night, but I didn't fancy meals in this hotel now. Then there would be the long afternoon and evening. Sub-Area didn't seem to care whether I got down to work or not. Suppose they forgot all about me and I had to hang about, doing nothing? I wondered how the other nineteen girls were faring, scattered by now across the face of India, to every major military station. Welfare, the Cinderella service!

Depressed, I went into the bedroom. A dust-smeared face stared back at me in the mirror. I was hot and sticky; at least I could have another bath, to pass the time. Figures moved busily about amongst the tents. I looked at the knotted rope. The 'boy' had faithfully promised he would join on another length and knock a nail in the wall to wind it round, as a temporary measure. He had forgotten.

Run came scampering over and I cuddled him in my arms, watching a group of B.O.R.s standing round a pail, dipping enamel mugs into it. Army elevenses, apparently. Perhaps one of them had a spare nail and a piece of string. But they all came over when I signalled.

'Has anyone got a large nail and a bit of rope? To fasten this door properly?' I put a bold face on the matter.

'Strewth!' That seemed to be the general sentiment, on close inspection of the primitive handle. But the nail and rope were in position within minutes, with the promise of a proper bolt to be fitted later in the day. They shared their elevenses with me, thick brown stuff like kidney soup, only it was sickly sweet.

'Wouldn't you rather have tea?' I smiled as I passed the mug back through the bars. Run seemed to like the stuff, so the mug was empty. I didn't want to hurt their feelings. 'Soup is awfully heavy for a climate like this, don't you think?' Perhaps, as Welfare, I could tactfully mention it in the proper quarter. But they all just gaped. And then turned away, grinning.

Very few officers patronized the hotel for lunch, apparently. I had the place to myself and was at the coffee stage when the first little group came into the dining-room. They were laughing and included me in their smiles. But none of them would ever get any encouragement from me again. I would shun the lawn as well.

Out of the corner of one eye, I saw one of them get up. He came over. 'May I?' and without waiting for my 'No', this major pulled out a chair and sat himself down. 'I understand you came along to our camp this morning? Our welfare chap reported you had called on him officially, to request office accommodation.'

'Well, I just asked, hoping.'

'Our C.O. is rather keen on your organization. He would be quite willing to give you one of the bedrooms next door to our welfare place. It will only be a very small room, of course.'

'Oh, yes, please.' I was all agog now with interest. 'Your C.O.'s bedroom will be heaps better than sharing with ENSA. I'd have had no privacy at all in that canteen.'

The major laughed. 'I see what you mean. Well, the C.O. will do his best for you. His exact words were that if you have any guts for the job at all, the other camps will be trying to entice you away from us.'

'Would he like to see me, to talk it over?'

'The room won't be yours until he *has* had a look at you.' Outspoken but fair enough. 'He suggests this afternoon, if you are free?'

'Any time will suit me,' I assured him.

'Be rather jolly to have a woman officer attached to our lot. Member of our Mess and first call on your services, as it were. Quite a coup! The C.O. is a wily old bird.' I didn't like the sound of him much. But I could look after myself and I had to find an office quickly. We were supposed to start operating within forty-eight hours of arrival at our stations.

'Come in, come in,' invited the C.O. when I presented myself for his inspection; no lipstick, no powder, just a shiny

nose and a welfare smile. 'Sit down, sit down.' He looked me over, keenly. If he was disappointed, he hid his feelings well. He was a small man, with an irritating habit of tapping his fingers on his office table, to a tune only he himself knew. 'You're rather young, rather young. But you'll do, you'll do.' He was certainly keen to give Families' Welfare an office. I had to restrain myself from kissing him on both cheeks for that.

'Could I move in tomorrow, please?'

He smiled. 'Have to ask Sub-Area first, request permission. Take a day or two. Official notice to the Brigadier then; your job to do that, keep him posted. Date of opening, office hours; has to go in Daily Orders. On our strength for supplies; all you need in reason.' Ask Major Fowler. Transport, too. That's Captain Adams.' He had told me a lot in his short, sharp barks.

'Thank you,' I said and meant it.

Sub-Area gave their permission, glad to 'get me off their strength, I supposed. Two days later I stood in the doorway and waxed enthusiastic.' There was a table and two chairs, a carpet with a hole in it, and some wooden packing-cases specially donated as filing cabinets. The bath-tub had been removed from the smaller back room but the tap in the wall remained. I could wash my hands and even make tea, if I bought an oil-stove. I would make curtains for the doorway—net curtains to give a little privacy without keeping out the fresh air—and, of course, I must get vases for flowers. It was perfect. I was delighted. My relief, when she came, ought to be pleased with my efforts, too.

But that was two days later.

Major Fowler, waiting outside his C.O.'s office, raised his eyebrows as I came out. I nodded and, without more ado, he took me into his own office and wrote down my list of office supplies.

Everything was going well at last.

There was no twilight in India. As the sun went down, it pulled the darkness down over the sky with it. The bugles blared, calling all ranks to roll down their sleeves and cover up their knees. The mosquito hordes came out at sunset. I did not know, this first evening, what the bugles were saying. It would have made no difference if I had. My button-through khaki drill uniforms had short sleeves, and as for my knees, I would take care to keep them covered up day and night.

The lawn in front was already filling up as I sat, on the veranda, writing spirited accounts of my doings to Aunt Katrine and Isabel. The two Staff chaps had gone back to

Delhi, so I should be alone in the hut block tonight. I wouldn't be taken by surprise tonight, though: the back door had a bolt now as well. Was Ron out there on the lawn? I glanced up from my writing-pad and my stomach did a somersault. He was standing, leaning against the door-post.

'Look here——' I began indignantly.

'I want to apologize for last night. Will you please forgive me?' Steady and direct. But he had chosen the wrong moment to make amends. I was flustered at his sudden appearance when I had been thinking about him.

'It hardly matters—one way or the other.' Quite frigid. 'I'm only up here for a few weeks. I hope you'll have the decency to keep out of my way.'

'In Dustypore?' He laughed, not very pleasantly. 'It can't be done, as you'll find out,' he added, and went off abruptly. His wife would never know about him and she would not worry. That was the way things went. Probably my colleague had had to put him in his place, too.. Any woman would do for him, obviously.

I wondered idly what this colleague of the sister service was like, and sat up with a jerk. I really must find out where she was billeted.

The 'boy' was able to tell me. She was here, in the hotel. He would take me to her room when I was ready.

So far, I had not set eyes on a single woman in Dustypore, and it was difficult to decide what to wear in the evening. I didn't want to look glamorous, by any means, but khaki drill morning, noon and night would be unbearable. My wardrobe was modest: two evening dresses, pre-war vintage, though still smart enough to pass muster, three cotton dresses, a black suit and a printed housecoat. The latter had a very full skirt and swept the ground in the grand manner; it would do for tonight. The general effect in the small mirror seemed all right and I scraped off the sparrow-marks. They hardly showed with the pattern.

The 'boy' led me to a wooden staircase at the side of the main building; just planks and a railing bar, with a square platform at the top. 'Miss sahib here.' He knocked loudly and went off down the steps.

'Who is it?' asked an agitated voice.

'It's me,' I reassured her, then remembered she would not know who 'me' was. 'The new welfare officer.'

'Oh. I won't be a minute.' The door opened.

'I'm sorry if I've come at an awkward time but I wanted to get to know you. Shall I go away and come back later?'

‘Of course not. Come in.’

I stood and gazed around her room. Barred windows, iron bedstead, hanging cupboard, small cane table, two upright chairs, chest of drawers; all were there. Her mirror was larger than mine, but it was stained as well as cracked. What I lost in size, I gained in clarity. But her bath-tub and the *et ceteras* stood openly behind the door, with no kindly brick wall to shut them off. A sheet was draped across between her cabin trunk and uniform trunk, both up-ended, as a screen. But it was a mere gesture. It was easier to look over the top than peer round the sheet.

She was standing, wrapped in her dressing-gown, and I met her eye.

‘Primitive sanitation wasn’t mentioned in London. Unless that bit about circumspection covered it. You know,’ and she began to recite. ‘“Amongst thousands of troops billeted in tents, there will be great need for circumspection. . . .”’ I remembered that bit, and we laughed together.

I sat on the bed, out of the way, while she dressed. She was petite, too—a great advantage in this attic where the roof sloped as no other roof I had ever seen sloped. Yet from the outside the building looked like a box, with a flat roof. A tall person would have knocked herself senseless every time she tried to stand upright.

‘Do you like Dustypore? I mean, are they all right, when one gets used to their peculiarities?’

‘I haven’t been around much yet. I can’t get used to this heat and I feel fagged out and ready for bed as soon as I’ve had my dinner. I never escape that crowd on the lawn though.’

‘Why on earth didn’t you bag that room they gave me? Or one of the others? This . . .’ and I waved at the exposed tub.

She laughed out loud. ‘I *had* the end room for three days! Those sparrows! And the open-at-both-ends effect! When the tents are empty, the lawn is full! You’ll be clamouring to have your bed moved up here after a few days of it,’ and she laughed again. ‘It’s unnerving, I assure you. I’ll make room for you up here.’

‘But can’t we move somewhere else? Be billeted with one of the families? Surely there’s somewhere in Dustypore with a little privacy?’

‘There isn’t anywhere else. For *us*.’ She sounded positive. ‘None of the officers’ wives are willing. I’ve tried. They’re building new blocks but they’ll be needed for the families passing through here, going home. You know, this all sounds terribly amusing, when I’m writing home, describing it all.’

She stopped powdering her nose and stared thoughtfully into the discoloured mirror. 'My young sister thinks it's thrilling; one girl to about every thousand men. But . . .' The powder-puff went into action again. She wore no wedding ring herself and she had been too tactful to mention mine. A good many of her service and mine were war-widows.

'I'm Margaret Michaelis, by the way,' I told her. 'My husband was killed. He was a fighter pilot. Four years ago.'

She was quick to sense I wanted no tactful sympathy. 'Eleanore Tarling, spinster, aged twenty-nine,' she smiled back. 'And also, by the way, I ought to apologize for not being there to welcome you last night. It must have been a ghastly experience with that car.' Her eyes laughed. 'No one seemed to know if you were coming or not. I had a terrific headache (it's the glare), so I went off to bed early, without any dinner. This morning I left just after six; it was my day to visit the Commandos. They're camped out at the lake, miles away. I've only just got back. The Commandos told me all about you. I was hurrying up to come over to meet you.'

'What about your office? Have you actually got one in that canteen?'

'The idea was, we should both share with ENSA. I protested I didn't want to listen all day to the sort of interviews your crowd have to cope with. I could have volunteered for that in the first place if I had fancied the family angle. My cases may worry me, but they're not the harrowing kind. So I've been given the spare cupboard in that canteen. They stored the empty bottles there. There's just enough room for a table and two chairs. If my client is a big chap, and they usually are—all the outsizes in the British Army seem to need resettling—we touch knees under the table and bang heads over it. The hazards of welfare!'

'I've refused that room with ENSA.'

She was dismayed. 'You won't be offered another. I'd better go in there with them and leave you the cupboard. Did you meet that Sub-Area Staff captain?' I nodded. 'I snubbed the lad so he's anti-welfare now. We'll get no favours out of him.'

I explained about the little C.O.'s bedroom and my high hopes in that direction.

'Welfare isn't wanted in Dustypore. It's badly needed but it's just not wanted——' She broke off. 'I'm awfully glad there's two of us now. We'll have to stick together.'

It was the beginning of a partnership. We went down to dinner, two women to scores of men.

'I haven't seen any women yet. Don't any of them come here to sit on the lawn or have dinner?'

Eleanore shrugged. 'There's only wives, nurses and W.A.C.(I) here. W.A.C.(I) are the Indian equivalent of the A.T.S. This place is out of bounds to them and the nurses. All the *wives* go to the Officers' Club. It's—not done, to come here.'

I digested this in silence. A hotel which was out of bounds to the other service women seemed an unhealthy billet for welfare officers.

'It's the B.O.R.s' dance at the canteen tomorrow night. We're supposed to go.'

'Will the troops fancy us as partners, though?'

'This will be my first one as well. I have to visit "M" Camp tomorrow. If I'm not back by seven, would you like to go on ahead, and I'll follow on as soon as I can?' I would much rather have waited for Eleanore but I could hardly say so—I had to stand on my own feet in Dustypore.

'See those three elderly chaps over there? They're all Commanding Officers. They can make it easy for you, if you impress them sufficiently. If they ask us to join them on the lawn afterwards, I think we ought to. Not good business to refuse C.O.s.'

I surveyed the balding trio without enthusiasm. We were invited to sit with them on the lawn. They were shrewd, kindly men, but though they asked a lot of pertinent questions about Families' Welfare, they were non-committal and non-enthusiastic.

'This scheme should have been started up years ago,' said the gunners' C.O. 'The long-service lads are due for repatriation. Here in Dustypore the men are either waiting to go home or just arrived as replacements. Not much scope for you. If you would just take over the camp library now, or broadcast gramophone records at meal-times, you'd be of some real use.'

'Can you act?' The R.A.M.C. colonel eased himself forward in his chair hopefully. 'We need women for our shows—feminine leads and so forth. Unhealthy practice, dressing men up as women. All padded,' and he indicated where elaborately.

It was dusky on the lawn. Eleanore seemed composed enough, but my cheeks flamed. She was beautifully slim, but I needed no padding at all to bring me up to R.A.M.C. standards, as outlined by their C.O. The man was being indecently familiar.

'What I specially want is someone to help with their shop-

ping problems.' The third Big White Chief hurried up to stake his claim. 'My lot are all homeward bound. They buy most of their presents to take home in the bazaar here. I've heard rumours—about the—the—er—difficulties. Their women-folk want clothing—er—you know the sort of thing—the things they—er—can't spare coupons to replace. My own wife, f'r instance . . .' He paused and I was glad. I didn't want to hear what his own wife couldn't replace, not from him. I could guess well enough, I'd always been short of clothing coupons myself.

'If,' I began carefully—'if I have no clients, I shall be glad to run errands, straighten up books on shelves and play gramophone records. But I cannot sing, dance or be comical on a stage.'

'You've a face like a mirror, Margaret,' Eleanore told me later. 'Can you act! They don't know what they want, up here, and welfare's too polite to tell them!'

All next day I waited expectantly for news from my little C.O. about the office. I washed my smalls, arranged to borrow a charcoal-heated iron, the size of an elephant's foot, from the manager and hired a *dhobi* (Indian washerman) who called, soliciting my custom. Also, I made courtesy calls on the camps and depots within walking distance of the hotel. My reception was mixed.

'You can do a lot of damage here, young woman, if you're not careful,' growled O.C. Royal Engineers. 'It'll be no use putting the men on a charge if they get familiar. That'll kill your office dead. Women in an army camp are always a nuisance, but to send a pretty girl to a place like Dustypore and tell the troops she's there to listen to everything bar nothing . . .' He shook his head. 'It's a bad scheme, a bad scheme. We'll help you all we can, of course. You'll interview all R.E.s in this camp in the R.S.M.'s office, down the block. He'll be standing by, to interfere, and that should stop any trouble from starting.'

'You seem to have a very poor opinion of your men, Colonel. If I need an R.S.M. as a bodyguard, I might as well leave Dustypore. It's nice of you to try to make things easy for me. I'll do my best for any Royal Engineers who come along to my office.' Boldly said, but I had begun to be full of misgivings myself.

Major Ronald Dover was second-in-command of a very large camp in Dustypore. His C.O. shook hands with me and explained that the major dealt with all welfare matters.

I could always call upon him, the C.O., for co-operation, but in the meantime he would hand me over to his second-in-command. I followed Major Dover out of the colonel's office and into his own.

I explained the policy of Families' Welfare. Ron questioned me in detail.

'Yes,' he said at last, 'that's what I thought it was. Now, Captain Michaelis, I should like to go over one or two pending cases with you. Your London H.Q. already have them in hand, but they could be speeded up. Greatly speeded up. Private Robinson, for instance. Now, his wife frequents Piccadilly Circus at nights. Private Robinson wants to go home, to take her in hand. It appears he can't be compassionately posted home until his wife agrees to be reconciled with him. Your H.Q. are being a bit cagey; they don't seem to be going all out to get a "Yes" from Mrs. Robinson. Why, I wonder? If they would only say why, straight out, I could try for a compassionate home posting on different lines, not the reconciliation angle. That'll be your job now, to ask them. I want a confidential report. Or a definite refusal to commit themselves to one. Then I can deal directly with the War Office.' Ron paused, gave me a very grim smile and went on: 'The worst is still to come, Captain Michaelis. Robinson got very drunk the last time his compassionate home posting was refused. A sweeper woman was handy, and they're always willing to oblige if the men pay them well enough. Two annas is the current price, I believe. About tuppence.' He paused again and the words 'I'll give you fifty rupees' hung in the air between us. Aunt Katrine had started something when she had smoothed out that sausage paper. I had to sit and listen to this without protest. 'Robinson is at the moment in the V.D. ward. He's due out next week and he'll be coming in to see you. He blames your H.Q. for every snag in his home affairs.'

'Why do you employ these sweeper women in the camps?' It was the only thing I could think of to say.

'We don't employ any women in any of the camps. You're the only one who isn't restricted by any out-of-bounds orders!' A needless taunt, this. 'These sweeper women are employed in the married quarters. They're medically examined regularly but they come and they go and they all look alike.'

'Send Private Robinson along when he comes out of hospital,' I said and rose to go. Ron rose, too, and stood looking down at his desk. 'Good afternoon, Major Dover.'

I walked home. Enough was as good as a feast, particularly in army welfare. I knew all about welfare work in theory, and

that sex and V.D. were two of its prime factors in army camps. But this Ron Dover had been too brutal, though I realized that he and every other Commanding Officer in Dustypore would have a perfect right to summon me to their offices for discussions on the same lines. I *had* to listen, so long as it concerned a B.O.R.'s family troubles. I was at their mercy, dependent on their courtesy and tact. As for the B.O.R.s, I was largely at their mercy, too. Appeals for help or punishment would, indeed, kill my office dead.

I walked along the road, between the ragged cactus hedges.

Trucks thundered past, shrouding me in a fog of dust; B.O.R.s saluted and stared hard; two naked Indian children, pot-bellied little imps, 'ran alongside' me, chanting shrilly 'Pistil peckin' MAH MAH'; a group of sweeper women overtook and passed me, flaunting in their regulation scarlet-and-yellow saris; full-bosomed women these, with their hips swaying provocatively and their white teeth stained red with betel-nut juice. Private Robinson! The promised interview with him would not be pleasant, but it was no use meeting trouble half-way.

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The instructions, Dress, B.O.R. Functions, For, were explicit. Uniform only. If dancing with Eleanore and me in cotton frocks was likely to stir up licentiousness amongst the troops, there was to be no pandering to it. Uniform would keep them all cool and calm, presumably.

Eleanore had not put in an appearance by seven o'clock, so I went off to the canteen dance alone in a *tonga*. I could hear the dance long before the canteen was reached. There must be hundreds of couples dancing, by the sound of things. Perhaps no one would ask me to dance and I could just sit quietly in a corner. 'Come back at nine,' I told the *tonga* driver.

Now for it! Taking a very deep breath, I jumped the ditch and walked across the stretch of hard earth. The figures clustered round the door made way for me and I was in.

The light and the noise struck one like an electric shock.

A dozen couples whirled about on the floor, the rest of the troops lined the walls, twenty deep at least, and their feet stamped in time to the music. When I read the phrase 'a battery of eyes' I know now exactly what is meant—I faced one that evening. There was no time to smile round at my flock. A voice was saying 'May I have——?' and I was out with the violent ones on the floor. A whistle blew suddenly and the floor was swept by a raging wave of khaki and olive-green, which ebbed as quickly as it had come, leaving me with an

entirely different partner. I had been torn out of the grip of the other one. The new lad whirled me fiercely back the few steps I had just come and again the whistle blew; the wave, the ebb and another partner. This was tremendous—three partners in about five minutes and me only a mediocre performer. I smiled up at this third face and it smiled agreeably back.

'This is a tap dance,' he was beginning, when the whistle went once more. Each new partner seemed intent on covering as much ground as possible while the going was good. Perhaps they were allowed to skip P.T. on dance days, to be fresh and hearty.

Fifteen or more partners later it ended, when every tooth in my mouth felt loose and choirs were splitting my head with 'Hallelujah' choruses. I was beside the piano and I leaned gratefully against it. In fact, I would have slid to the floor without any inhibitions about dignity, except that I was in uniform and a welfare officer, meeting the gang for the first time, in bulk. I must stay upright, for the honour of my trade. When my teeth grew more settled and the choirs were an echo, I could even see clearly again. The piano was the very last place I should have dropped anchor. It seemed to make me the most outstanding object in the hall. There was no sign of any of the other women—had they all gone home and left me to it?—and there I stood as if about to address the meeting. I caught an eye I seemed to know. It seemed to know me. The 'corperil'! Now in 'chaige' of the piano! Somehow I had never connected him with such frivolity as a dance band.

'Whit the flamin'——' I began to prompt him, but he was leaning forward earnestly.

'Mam, there's a "ladies" doon the lobby yonder,' and then he broke off, to sit, stiff and expectant, his hands poised over the keys. As he began to play again, the saxophone sounded off in my right ear. The spring I gave landed me into the outstretched arms of a suppliant partner. I was off again.

No tap dance, this. This was a tango, and I was doing it for the first time in my life, before a critical audience of experts. If my friends the B.O.R.s had one little vanity, it was the belief that given a girl and a band, they could tango with the best, though their hair and their boots were permanent handicaps. My earnest partner spared me no steps; at least half of them must have been his own improvements. When my feet were not in his way, my shoulder-bag was. We scudded up the floor. We dipped. Oh, shades of Carmen Miranda, my beret was off! I hadn't had a chance to take it off myself yet. We dipped the other way. My partner picked it up. Would he

slap it back on again in another of his swoops? No, we were at the knee-to-knee business now; his were bonier, so I gave him best. Then we glided snakily, a real smart turn, and we were right back again, holding hands the while. The pace was slower for a spell now—the band had to get their breath back, too. He was doing fancy steps off his own bat whilst I marked time—left, right, left, right—until he returned to the fold. He returned far too soon. A few quicker beats on the drum and we were at it like Cossacks. He was going to jump in the air and clap his feet! No, thank God, he must have remembered his boots before he was exactly airborne. ‘You can lift your foot, next time we dip,’ he promised me. How did he know? Face like a mirror, Margaret? ‘I can wait till it’s over and you turn your back,’ I whispered gratefully. I caught passing glimpses of other couples cutting similar capers. But we were covering more ground, more robust in every way. Back to the dipping again. ‘Raise it.’ A man of great insight, this. ‘Now!’ But I was gazing at my colleague, framed in the doorway, willing her with all my strength to clear out of here before it was too late. We dipped low and broke surface again. ‘Dreamy tune, this.’ Was this young man going to sing to me as well? He was. He did. Throbbing croaks which made me shiver even while I sweated. He’d lived among those frogs too long. Faces, nothing but staring faces, and not one smile—just concentration. This was their dance, their speciality, the tango!

I caught Eleanore’s eye as she whooshed past in the arms of a dancing dervish . . . her partner was getting limbered up before he got down to it in earnest. There was a shocking thump, which shook the whole floor, and a sudden surge of B.O.R.s to the spot. On with the dance, though your sister in welfare has been stretched out flat almost at your very feet. Knee to knee again now, but no cowardice this time. Welfare was on its mettle now. I cracked back as hard as I could, though my legs were wobbling enough, all ready for the Cossack touch when it came round again. My partner’s boots slipped on the floor and he slithered away from me horizontally, but I was there, faithful, to hold him up by the chin like a swimmer, until his hands struck bottom and he came back to my arms. ‘S’easy enough, you’re picking it up. S’great, this,’ and he shook me like a terrier with a rat. A last menacing ‘ra-ta-rum-ta-rum’ and the band stopped dead.

Eleanore had been carefully raised and was being dusted down. My young man, still holding tight, went into technicalities. ‘You should let yourself go more. Fluid like.’ I cut him short.

'Thank you. I enjoyed that.'

We sat down together, Eleanore and I, in what seemed to be the Ladies' Enclosure. The nurses were there, in one little group; the W.A.C.(I) in another. They all looked dead beat, too. Three polite soldiers brought trays of lemon squashes.

We sat like two hypnotized khaki rabbits.

'I'm too old for this whoopee,' my colleague said at last flatly.

I nodded in understanding. I was, too.

'Can you tango?' I asked her. She shook her head.

'You?' I shook mine.

'I'm not fluid enough.' Tactless to pass on to her the item about letting yourself go more.

'Excuse me, mam.' My beret was being thrust at me. It was sodden. He had parked it in his bosom and his shirt was piebald with sweat.

'Oh, thanks.'

In the best interests of welfare, we should have mixed freely, as they call it, with the troops and chatted. We did, later, of course, when we had been broken in to these affairs, but this was only the first encounter, and we were content to be left to lick our wounded spirits. When the band struck up once more we both winced and drew together instinctively. It was no use. The B.O.R. lions were already a-swarm round the welfare martyrs.

'*Tonga*, nine o'clock,' I managed to bellow as we were galloped out into the arena. I think Eleanore nodded her head; if not, it was being nodded violently for her.

The *tonga* was waiting, but neither of us could raise a foot, even to the first step. The driver was puzzled. Sahibs, sometimes, yes, of course; but memsahibs, surely not? Passing B.O.R.s hoisted us up into the back seat with great good humour.

We sat in silence for a while, as the *tonga* jingled homewards.

The moon lit up the road with muted daylight. The little *tonga* bells rang out gleefully, the driver called out his warnings to the B.O.R.s and their officers walking homewards. The horse's hooves made soft thuds in the dust. A baby cried as we went through the Families' Quarters. Two little donkeys stood under a tree, quietly forlorn.

Eleanore spoke at last. 'It's rather pathetic,' she said quietly, and I knew she didn't mean our dancing. Or anything we had passed on the way home.

Chapter 5

'She hasn't struck me as being that sort of a girl,' said the padre thoughtfully. 'One, never knows, of course. But I've been writing what you might call love-letters to her for over a year now.'

'We'll soon know. I'll send a signal straight away. Our visitor will call on this mother-in-law first and then on the wife. It will take some tactful handling, if we're to avoid a permanent family feud. I suppose you had to give Private Small the letter back?'

'I couldn't very well keep it. I wrote out that bit, as well as I could remember it, and came straight over here. Why?'

'He's almost certain to ask some of his mates to read it over to him again, and then the sparks will fly. Don't you think it would be a good idea to have a talk to the corporal of his *basha*? He could pass the word round to be careful, and once they've been warned, not one of the *basha* will read that bit out.'

This was the first case of illiteracy I had had. Private Small could neither read nor write, and when he joined the army he had had to rely on his padre or his mates to conduct his correspondence for him.

This morning Small had had a letter from his mother and had asked the padre to read it out to him. The padre had skipped one paragraph. '... and Edie won't stop away from that American camp. She's at all their dances. Last time I saw her up the street she looked to me as if she had got herself into trouble, by the shape of her. I thought I'd just mention it. ...' Edie was Private Small's wife, and his mother had perhaps forgotten that this titbit would be read out to her son by his padre or his mates. It might or might not be true, but until things could be straightened out a little there was no need for this B.O.R. to sweat it out, handicapped by his illiteracy.

'I'll tell the corporal as soon as I get back to camp. The whole affair is in your hands now; make what you can of it. You're still kept pretty busy, I notice.'

'Not nearly so rushed now,' I smiled. 'I can even go home for lunch most days. The queues of men on that veranda outside used to terrify me when I got here in the mornings. I just unlocked the door, sat down and began. Number, name, rank, regiment, et cetera, now what's your trouble, for one B.O.R. after another, like an automaton. I wasted a lot of time

taking detailed notes of everything they said because I knew I'd never remember anything about any of them, once they left the office. And my digestion's ruined with army "char". The corporal next door brings it in by the bucketful, to revive me.'

'I always notice the light burning in here at night, when I come back from the Mess about nine. I came over once or twice and looked in, but you were busy interviewing. Overdoing it.'

'It was my own fault mostly. I was too slow. Everything runs like clockwork now, more or less. I know exactly how much time to waste on every case.'

'I'll take that as a hint,' laughed the padre, 'and go.'

I had meant it as a hint. I wanted to get the signal off about Private Small without delay. The sooner his womenfolk were contacted the better.

'VISIT MRS SMALL RE LETTER HER SON STATING WIFE EDIE HAVING CHILD PROBABLE FATHER AMERICAN SOLDIER STOP VISIT WIFE CONFIRM DENY STOP SMALL ILLITERATE STOP UNINFORMED.'

There was no need to put any more. Our visitor would do all that was wanted. My job was easy compared with hers. The reply signal was reassuring enough. 'WIFE DENIAL STOP EXCESS FAT STOP MEDICAL CONFIRMATION FAT STOP MOTHER WILLING APOLOGIZE.' The American Army could hardly be blamed for excess fat. But it was many weeks before wife and mother-in-law were persuaded back on to speaking terms with each other. The padre and Small's *basha* mates scanned his letters almost feverishly during that anxious period, in case either lady should see fit to denounce the other. But the letters left the matter severely alone; our visitor had coped nobly with them both. As for the original letter, a bottle of ink was 'accidentally' spilt over it, early on, in the *basha*. Private Small was repatriated eventually, with his group, unsuspecting, and if the matter was resurrected then, at least he was at home to pass judgment personally. But I was worried about it as I typed the opening signal.

This morning, for the first time since the office had opened six weeks ago, there had been no B.O.R.s waiting about on the veranda. It was a relief, this blessed feeling of not being rushed. My advertised office hours—9 to 4, closed Saturday afternoons and Sundays—had gone by the board after the very first day. Office hours had become 8 a.m. every morning to 9 p.m. most nights. And then I had hurried home to the hotel, with the masses of notes, to sit on the little veranda,

typing requests for visits to be made in towns and villages scattered over the face of Britain. The manager had lent me his typewriter, gladly, to spare me bringing the office machine back every night. Each Sunday I had visited the hospital, in case any of the sick and wounded B.O.R.s wanted to consult me. When the interviews were over, I wrote home mail for the disabled or for those on the danger list. Those B.O.R.s in Dustypore were never anxious to report sick.

'Why not?' I would argue with them. 'It's stupid to take risks with your health in a country like India. The nurses and the orderlies do all they can for you.'

They agreed enthusiastically enough about the devotion of the nursing staff; it was just that they felt cut off, lying in a hospital bed, with no visiting days at all to look forward to. No bunch of flowers laid on their beds, no soft hands to hold theirs, no kiss in leave-taking and no fussy demands to be told exactly what the doctor had thought and said. Their mates came in when they could, but one soldier visiting another in such circumstances was usually a tongue-tied, far from hilarious affair. Home mail was all-important for the patients. When letters stopped arriving for any one of them, for any inexplicable reason—not just a routine hold-up of the mail-bags—I would send the signals flying, to ask the whys and wherefores. The reason was usually simple: often, only too often, carelessness or forgetfulness or the plea of being too rushed to sit down and write. It was a pity that the sighs of relief from those sick and wounded soldiers, when they were reassured that all was well with their loved ones at home and letters would be coming again soon, could not have been relayed across the seas.

Matron gave me a cup of tea in her own private sanctum on these Sunday excursions. She was the 'cosiest'-looking woman I had ever seen, plump without being at all stout.

'In a way, I shall be sorry to leave Dustypore,' I would tell her. 'I've grown very fond of you all.'

'You *haven't* left Dustypore yet,' she would remind me. 'In the army, if you want to be posted to the North Pole, demand to be posted to the South Pole. You'll find yourself up the N.P. in next to no time. You've asked for Bombay, so you'll get Peshawar.'

But I could afford to smile. The new contingent of welfare officers had already sailed from U.K., and in less than three weeks Dustypore and I would part company. My work in Bombay would be the same, but I should have a home life of my own, with Isabel and Charles and my nieces and nephew.

Glenda and Nick and Meggie had met their aunt for the first time in Bombay, and then our acquaintance had been brief. Would they like me, their sob-sister aunt?

Sob-sister had been the name the troops had given me at first. In fact, there had been much ribaldry amongst them when they had learned the details of my job. 'Going to the W.C. [Welfare Captain] for a clear-out,' they had sniggered. Just like a dose of mental Epsom salts! But talk on those lines was a fighting issue in the *bashas* and canteens now; or at least, so Eleanore said. I still had my critics and detractors, but they weren't so noisy about it all. It was natural enough. A woman who was prepared to discuss with a man every aspect of his matrimonial life, a woman who called V.D. by its proper name and looked a man straight in the eye the while, must have seemed shocking. The B.O.R. was a strait-laced individual, on the whole. Smut there had to be in an army of men, but ninety per cent. of the men accepted it without relish. Sometimes I had almost faltered, but practice makes for poise, and Dustypore was no place for a faltering woman.

The British Army had its knaves and its jokers, just like a pack of cards. Plenty of each variety, and I was the target for both. At first, that is, because for a week or two one case in almost every ten was a phony. The knaves came in, full of smeary troubles, but they gave themselves away; they wanted no action taken at home—they just wanted to talk 'things' over with an 'expert'. They had their wish, and often they wished they hadn't. Their visits tailed away as the novelty of the thing wore off. The jokers were a different matter. They ostentatiously wanted action taken at home and I accepted their cases without comment, trustfully. When they were foolish enough to give their genuine home address our visitors, interviewing surprised wives, left reprisals in most capable hands. But most gave imaginary addresses, usually in large towns. Then our visitors sent urgent signals. 'CANNOT CONTACT STOP CHECK CORRECT ADDRESS.' I had discussed it with Eleanore, wrathfully.

'It's a shame, those women at home chasing about, trying to find a house in a street that doesn't exist. They're nearly all married women, with their own homes to look after, but because they're keen to do something to help the chaps overseas, they take on this visiting. I bet they comb the district from end to end, questioning everybody they can think of, before they give up and signal back they can't contact.'

But Private Cornet put a stop to the jokers. Luck was with me the morning I interviewed him. 'It's me wife,' he had told

me. 'Says she's keen on the postman. . . .' The corporal next door handled all my signals. He brought this one back to me. 'You've got the address wrong, mam,' he pointed out. 'Cornet lives next door to a pal of mine, in Hull, not Chichester.' 'Are you certain?' I had demanded, and he had flushed. 'That's not his proper address, mam. You can take that from me, straight, mam.' 'Thanks. All right, Corporal.' I had not reported any of the leg-pullers to their Commanding Officers. What was the use? When they were told I wanted to see them to check their home address, they said they wanted their welfare case dropped. But Private Cornet had been a godsend. I had called on his C.O. after a suitable interval, the regulation time for a reply from U.K. to have arrived.

'May I interview Private Cornet here in your office, please? I don't want you to know anything about it beforehand. And could he come under escort, with the R.S.M. to stand behind?'

The C.O. had been reluctant. The procedure was equivalent to open arrest or some such formality.

'He's not being arrested. But I want witnesses, talkative witnesses,' which hadn't reassured the worried C.O. at all.

Private Cornet had been ushered in. He stiffened to attention and stiffened even more at sight of me.

'I have good news for you,' I began. 'Your wife is willing to give up the postman. But there's bad news as well. She says she fell in love with him because she hasn't set eyes on you for years and didn't even know where you were. Now that she does know, she wants to remind you that there is a little matter of five fatherless children to be supported. Are you willing to resume your responsibilities, Private Cornet?'

Private Cornet was sagging at the knees, but his escort held him up and his R.S.M. was there, to remind him he had not been ordered to stand at ease yet. His C.O. gave him permission to speak, but permission wasn't everything. It had been a painful scene.

'Do I understand you to be saying that you have a wife and a child in Hull, Private Cornet? Because if so, you're admitting bigamy. In the presence and hearing of your Commanding Officer.'

Private Cornet denied bigamy in the presence and hearing of everybody.

'Then why did you give me the address of this lady in Chichester and take such an interest in her liaison with the postman? A husbandly interest, Private Cornet?'

Private Cornet pleaded loss of memory. He had been given permission to withdraw, with escort and R.S.M. in attendance.

I had given an explanation to his C.O. and been reprimanded for false representation. Dustypore jokers stayed out of my office after that.

I had accepted all cases and refused none. Sergeant Donter had been a lesson to me. I had been so sure that he was a phony when he had told me his story.

'It's the wife, mam. I'm to sleep in the back-yard when I get demobbed. Effie has grown used to the cat; she says she can't abide the thought of me.'

'Oh. She'll probably change her mind when she sees you. Could I read some of her letters?' That should stump him. It had seemed to, because his face had reddened.

'I tore them up.'

'All of them?'

'Yes, mam.'

'Well, what action do you want us to take exactly?'

'I want that cat destroyed.' Sergeant Donter had been emphatic. 'The quicker the better!' And then he had added, rather queerly, 'Effie was bombed out, mam. Could you make it urgent?'

Urgent meant a signal. But a signal phrased 'EFFIE WIFE SERGEANT DONTOR REFUSES COHABIT DEMOBILIZATION STOP PREFERS CAT STOP DESTROY CAT' would cause comment in the Signals Office of Dustypore. Signalmen are human; they would be all agog for the return signal. Hoping for the best, I had sent off a cable. The Post Office authorities were requisitely detached in their transactions with clients. The reply cable had been puzzling. 'REASSURE SERGEANT STOP EFFIE IN OUR CARE STOP FULL REPORT AIR MAIL.' I had taken the air mail report along to his Commanding Officer personally.

'Effie Donter was bombed out in early 1944. She was the sole survivor in seven houses destroyed by rocket. Has been billeted ever since in requisitioned property, run off hostel lines. Sleeps in cubicle and shares communal meals. War work in local factory machining uniforms. Fellow residents state she keeps herself to herself. Very reserved type. Her cat survived rocket with her. Unallowed keep cat in hostel. Fellow residents aware cat roams wild daytime, returns to sleep Mrs. Donter's cubicle most nights. They did not report this breach of rules. Mrs. Donter has for weeks refused to talk to anyone except cat. Several times refused interview but finally consented. Suffering from severe nervous breakdown. Medical certificate enclosed for action your end. Is now

in seaside home at Sidmouth for rest and care. Doctor states recovery slow but certain. Regular weekly reports will be sent direct to Commanding Officer. Mrs. Donter unable correspond with husband meantime. Will be encouraged to do so as cure proceeds.'

'Just in time, it seems,' said the C.O. quietly. 'I think I'll have him in while you're here.'

Sergeant Donter listened, impassive and erect.

'Thank you, sir. The captain wanted to read Effie's letters, sir. They've been wild like for weeks back. She kept on I'd run away and left her but this cat had stayed faithful. I was to change places with it, sir.' He had taken some crumpled sheets out of his pocket. 'This is Effie's last letter, sir. If the captain . . .'

There had been no written words on the crumpled sheets. Just childish scribbled drawings of cats.

Six weeks of it, listening and writing it all down. . . .

The monsoon rains had begun early. It had been raining steadily for three weeks, and the face of Dustypore had changed almost overnight from hard brown to soft green. The office was only ten minutes' walk from the hotel, taking the short cut through the back gate. It was three times as long round by the main road. The duty-truck picked me up every morning, just in case. Monsoon weather was temperamental: torrential downpour one minute, blazing sunshine the very next. Transport home in the evenings was simply arranged. When I was ready to close down, I told the chap in the Mail Office just round the corner. He stopped the first vehicle passing, to give me a lift. At least, it had been simple until the rains began. After a night or two, then, the same jeep had been waiting in the road, when the mail corporal had come along to tell me transport had been stopped for me. Ron had been at the wheel.

'Please don't bother to collect me. I can always get a lift home,' I had assured him, politely. 'It's such a waste of your time.'

'Leave me to worry about that, Margaret.' He was polite, too. Margaret! How dared he!

I could hardly refuse to climb into the jeep, with that mail corporal in attendance. He and his relief had begun to look knowing when they summoned me to ride home, always in that attentive jeep.

'I'd much *rather* you didn't come. It will cause talk; you

hanging round my office every night, like a—like a stage door.' That should sting him, surely. He was quite unruffled.

'Riding round in trucks with every Tom, Dick and Harry you can pick up will cause more talk. You're an officer, remember? This road is damned dark. You're a little fool, Margaret. Can't you see the risks you're running?' A remark which sat strangely on him!

The road was dark, with gloomy trees dripping rain on each side. Electric-light bulbs, strung at infrequent intervals, seemed to intensify the dark spaces between. The B.O.R.s surged along on their way to the cinema and then surged back again, but for the most part it was deserted. Every night I had made up my mind to be firm and close the office prompt at six or, at least, no later than seven, telling the waiting B.O.R.s to come back in the morning. They had waited months and even years, some of them, for a bit of help and advice; a few more hours couldn't really matter to them. But when I saw them, standing patiently and orderly, in their clumsy boots, their capes shiny with rain and their upturned bush-hats limp round their ears, I hadn't the heart to be officious. Some of them could only pluck up enough courage to come at night, when they would be inconspicuous. They might not come back in the morning. I interviewed to the last man, always.

'Don't grudge me a little pleasure,' Ron would laugh. 'I'll miss these jaunts when you leave us for Bombay.' But it couldn't be much pleasure, driving a surly, silent welfare officer home on rainy nights. I had a feeling I was going to miss those silent jaunts, too.

Lonely men are queer men; living under herd conditions, in a tropical climate, they ponder overmuch on one particular theme. The pondering affects them in different ways. I had typed out the signal concerning Private Small's affairs, and as no clients had put in an appearance, decided that now would be a good time to clean and oil my typewriter. This lull between interviews was likely to be short-lived.

Private Archibald Bold arrived before the oil-bottle had even been uncorked. He stood hesitating in the doorway.

'Come in,' I invited and lifted the typewriter back on to its packing-case.

'It's Alice, mam. Always on the boil-up about something. She packs more grumbles into one page and a half than the whole *basha* gets in a month's mail. Misery, misery, misery. She's carrying on about the gas-oven, now. Says if she sticks her head in it she couldn't rely on the pressure not failing. That's a dig at me, mam. I'm in the gas-works in Civvy Street.

And the kids, they've got everything, from flat feet to ringworm. Or so Alice has it.'

'Do they look delicate? I mean, has Alice sent any recent photos of them?'

'That's them. Taken a couple of months ago, in a proper studio.'

The photograph showed three of the healthiest-looking children I had ever set eyes on. I looked across at their father. He nodded.

'Bursting with it! But Alice won't have it. It's all written down on the back there.'

It was, in a neat, precise handwriting. 'Andy had to sit on a chair because of his fallen arches. If you look, you can see where Daisy's hair hasn't grown in yet, with the ringworm. It was just behind her left ear.' I peered at Daisy's left ear with the help of my magnifying glass. Early on, I had had to buy this glass, to help decipher some of the handwriting in the letters handed over to me. Private Bold, interested, asked if he might look through the glass, too. Together, we tracked down the ringworm.

'The third one isn't mentioned, anyhow.'

'William? He was *sick*. They had to take the photo twice. That bit's in a letter. Alice made them give her a pail and she scrubbed the whole mess up for them. I can just see it. . . .' I could, too. A harassed, apologetic woman, getting down to it.

'Have you a photo of your wife?'

'Pre-war, this one is. Alice says I don't want a picture of her, to tote around, all sloppy.' I gazed at Alice Bold, pre-war. A firm face, a nice face, with a smile in the eyes which the mouth would not acknowledge.

'Has she always been—well, fussy about trifles?'

'*Fussy*?' Private Bold cast up his eyes expressively. 'I'll say she's fussy. Mind you, she doesn't mind a bit of mess about the place and I like things nice myself. That's all right. I'm not complaining about her,' and Bold steered me back to the main issue. 'It's her letters, mam.'

'What about money? Is she worried about that? Finding it difficult to manage on your army pay?' So many wives, comfortable enough before the war, were finding things pinched on army allotments.

'She's better off. The firm make up my wages regular and I'm one less to feed. No, she's saving steady, is Alice.'

I glanced through the half-dozen letters Bold had brought in. 'Dear Archibald. . . . Your affectionate wife, Alice.' No X X X X X at all. Precise, conscientious efforts, telling him all

about his mother, his children, his friends, his dog, his garden, but very little about his wife, and that little couched in bitter, deprecatory terms. 'She keeps you up to date, at least.'

'And who wants to be kept up to date? It's *her* I want to hear about. But she's all misery. She never says anything about—about——' he cast around for suitable words and then finished, briefly, 'about—you know.' I knew, all right.

'Do you ever say anything about—you know—in your letters?'

Archibald flushed. 'It's——' He swallowed hard. 'I—I've got nothing to go on. The other chaps' wives'—another violent swallow—'they've got something to go on.'

'You've been out here over three years, Private Bold. And you're due for repatriation in seven months. Neither of you seems to be capable of giving the other anything to go on. I honestly don't think your wife would like our local visitor to call on her, to discuss the warmth of her letters to you.' Those patient visitors for Families' Welfare, what jobs they were expected to do, with no praise or public recognition of their services! 'Alice tells you what she thinks you want to know, and she strikes me as being too sensible to have any suicidal tendencies. Nothing exciting ever happens to her, so she throws in a bit of martyrdom. They're rather nice letters, and they're certainly not full of grumbles.'

'I don't want *nice* letters!' Alice's husband almost ground his teeth. 'I want——' He broke off sharply and stared at the floor. Men bare their souls on many subjects, in a welfare office, miles from home, overseas.

'I see.' Well, seven months ought to be long enough to break through Alice's repression, if Archibald gave his full co-operation. 'Do you ever call her darling and sweetheart and pet names?'

'We-ell, no.'

'What do you call her, then?'

'Old girl, mostly, I suppose. And—and Mum.'

'The sooner you start with a few loving words the better, then.'

'But we've been married nine years, mam. I'm past it.' He looked at me and added quickly, 'I think.' Poor material, this, to work on.

'Private Bold, you want letters that are "not nice", don't you?'

Private Bold hoddled, without much spirit.

'All right, then; pull yourself together and we can make a start. Alice may not play up, but at least it'll pass the time and

give you a new interest. I'll draft all your letters from now on, because once you get started, you can't just stop. You'll have to keep it up until you go home. If you don't get results here, we'll hope you'll get them when you meet Alice.' A spasm passed over A. Bold's face. 'Now, then, let me see.'

I began to write. 'You've just come off guard duty this morning. Be sure to put 5.30 a.m. beside the date. You've——'

'But that's all wrong, nam. And the sergeant will——'

'Alice doesn't know anything about army routine and your sergeant isn't going to read this letter. Are you writing it or am I? Where was I? Oh, yes. There was just the quietness and the moon and a very faint breeze and you pacing up and down. All of a sudden, you felt you'd have given ten years of your life to have had her beside you. You know she'll laugh when she reads that, but she doesn't know how a man feels when he's longing to have his wife in his arms. Don't forget to underline "longing". Underline it several times. You even began to play a little game with yourself, pretending that every time you turned, you'd find her standing there——'

Private Bold asserted himself. 'Alice—Alice will think I've got sunstroke.'

'Oh! Well, I'll cover that further on, by blaming it all on the moon. Now, you even began to hurry up, taking quicker steps, so you could turn faster——'

'You can't hurry, nam, there's a regulation pace. I have to rendezvous with one of my mates every fifteen minutes.'

'Look, my lad, you haven't *been* on guard duty, so what does it matter if you hurried and had to hang about? You're out there in the moonlight, alone with Alice, and she won't thank you for bringing your mates on the scene, too. Now then. But, of course, when you turned, there was never anything but buildings and earth and trees. Then you began to talk aloud to her, calling her names which you've often wanted to call her but didn't, in case she thought you soft. You——'

'Soft!' muttered Private Bold.

'... wondered what she was doing. 'Darling little Alice, when you get into our bed—you haven't got twin beds, have you?' I broke off to check.

'No. It's a—a double,' agreed Private Bold, almost strangling.

'... our bed, do you ever lie awake and wish I were beside you? You never tell me if you do. Now you can't write any more—the corporal is waiting for you, to march into breakfast—but you're going to get your mate to post this letter

straight away, because if you don't, when you wake up this afternoon you'll never have the nerve to send it at all. Just put simply at the end, does she know how much you love her. Better read it and tell me where you want it improved.' Private Bold read it through several times.

'O.K.?'

'O.K., mam.'

I opened a file for him, with notes as guidance for my colleague, when she arrived to take over. I wouldn't be in Dustypore to see the conclusion of this. File 1001! The number gave me quite a shock. Had I really interviewed a thousand men? But the steady stream was obviously drying up now. I should be able to spend less time in the office, visit the camps more often and give a little attention to that other side of my duties, the social side.

Every Officers' Mess and Sergeants' Mess in Dustypore had sent invitations to functions of one kind or another; they were piled untidily in one drawer. But, apart from two dances in the B.O.R.s' canteen, I had had to refuse every invitation. Eleanore had passed her peak of work soon after my arrival and she had gone alone to each and every function.

'My feet are killing me,' she would moan at breakfast. 'There's no such species as wallflowers in this place! Every dance has to be danced! They would cut you up and divide you round if they could. When are you going to shoulder your whack of the white woman's burden in this he-man's empire?'

'There's been no slackening off yet at the office,' I would assure her, a Job's comforter. 'I can't shirk work to let you sit out dances.'

'Sit out dances! Sit out dances! Listen to her, someone! I get a chance to *walk* one out sometimes when my partner can't dance. Some of these comics have never been on a dance-floor in their lives; they tell me so to my very face. Admiring their own pluck at being on one now! Anything goes with welfare! My own feet have a row with me every night about it!'

Eleanore Tarling, spinster, aged twenty-nine, had come out to India for another purpose besides welfare work. She had told me her story, though no one else in Dustypore knew or guessed. Her fiancé had been in India in September 1939, in the employ of a large oil company. He had joined up in the Indian Army and was now, and had been for years, a prisoner-of-war in Jap hands.

'Jeff will be repatriated to India for demob. when the Japs are squashed. So here am I, all ready and waiting, to marry

him! I'll serve my full welfare term, of course—Jeff will have business details keeping him out here too—and then we'll go home together. You'll like him, Margo.' I was sure I would. Jeff Downing was one man I could bear to meet.

Chapter 6

The Officers' Club in Dustypore was an unpretentious place. It perched on a bare hillside just outside the cantonments, and the rough, winding road went no further than the front door. An unroofed veranda backed on to the 'ballroom' and two squat wings thrown out on either side housed the dining-room and the cloakrooms. Regiments stationed there at the time of Queen Victoria's accession had planted eighteen trees to commemorate the event, and these still stood, at the back of the building, towering over it. Some of the Queen's soldiers who had helped plant the trees were still in Dustypore, too, in the little cemetery at the foot of the hill on the other side.

The mid-week dance was in full swing, and Eleanore and I were there, as guests of my little C.O. I had grown very fond of the little colonel, and when he had suggested that we should dine in his Mess and make up a party for this dance afterwards, I had been delighted to be able to accept.

'Hear they've stopped mobbing your office at last, at last. Good thing, good thing. Give you a rest; you need a rest.'

'The interviewing rush is over. It's desk work now; the reports are pouring back from U.K. I have to get them sent round to all the camps.'

'Had thirty from you yesterday. Quite a shock, quite a shock. Queueing on my veranda now. Don't care for the job, reading them out. Has to be done, though, has to be done. That little fellow, what's his name—Potter, Bandy Potter. Nasty thing to tell him about that girl of his. Must get him posted home if I can. Special recommendation. Urgent.'

Bandy Potter, that little fellow, whose daughter May, aged sixteen, had broken her mother's heart. 'Twelve, May was, and still at school, last time I saw her. My little May . . . it don't seem possible. . . .' For who knows better than a serving soldier what can happen to girls who giggle foolishly, earn 'easy' money and have a 'good time' with the scum of an army camp? Bandy Potter, who had buried his face in his hands and muttered fiercely, 'Oh God! why can't they let me

go home?’ and knew, as I did, that even if ‘they’ sent him home tomorrow, he would carry the words ‘too late’ like scars in his own heart.

‘It’s nice to be going out this evening, but I feel guilty about enjoying myself,’ I had remarked to Eleanore as we waited for the car.

‘Do you know how much weight you’ve lost? Do you know you haven’t worn evening dress once since you arrived? Do you know those Judy tabs [Eleanore’s name for the officers’ wives] are telling each other you have to stick to uniform because you haven’t anything else to wear? Forget those files of yours once you’re *outside* the office. You can’t do any more than you are doing. You’ll knock them all for six tonight, Margaret! The blow will be all the harder because so long delayed!’ A great morale-builder, Eleanore!

So I ‘knocked them all for six’ in dull brown taffeta, with gleaming stripes of scarlet, cream and gold. My hair was very long and I usually wore it coiled in the nape of my neck, but tonight it was swept up, Edwardian fashion, and a scarlet rose on a brown ribbon neckband added a finishing touch. Eleanore, in white lace with a camellia tucked in her dark hair, was slim and debonair and her grey eyes laughed at life.

Matron joined our party at the Club. ‘A new face and a new dress, godsend to us all up here! The men look at the face and the women scrutinize the dress. You’ll get top marks for both, Margaret,’ she had remarked, ever blunt, as she seated herself comfortably in a cane chair and looked about her. ‘Quite a crowd here tonight.’

The same pathetic scarcity of women partners as there was at the B.O.R.s’ canteen. But there were no tap dances here. Instead, every fourth dance was a ‘Paul Jones’, and it was an unwritten law that the males who had brought partners with them should sit out the ‘Paul Jones’.

‘Canteen or Club, they have every scheme for gate-crashing at their fingers’ ends,’ whispered Eleanore as we held hands in the tiny ladies’ circle, waiting for the music to begin. I might have known I should find Ron facing me when the music stopped.

‘Enjoying yourself, Margaret?’

‘Yes, thank you. This is my first evening here.’

‘I know that! You ought to wear evening dress all day and every day. It suits you.’ We danced amicably until the music stopped and the circle re-formed. I might have known I should find him facing me once more when the music stopped.

'I—it's rather funny, having you again when the men's circle is so large,' I babbled, furious at the coincidence.

'I'm always lucky, Margaret. *Almost* always. I suppose, now that you're in circulation for evenings out, you wouldn't care to come up here with me next Saturday?'

'No. I've got forty-eight hours' leave and I'm going down to Bombay.' We danced not so amicably until the music stopped and the circles re-formed.

'You're trying this! It's the third time!'

'Of course I'm trying it—we're all trying it, to get a partner. I'm just luckier. Relax and don't look so furious. You'll attract attention, blushing like that. I didn't know women blushed nowadays. It goes well with that hair-style, I must say.'

'If you're lucky next time, I won't dance with you! I'll—I'll walk off the floor.'

'Challenge accepted, Margaret! Everybody in the place will see you're furious with me. Why? they'll ask themselves. There's no smoke without fire, they'll say. Snubbing a harmless officer——'

'Fourth time lucky and no walking off, after all! Keep a poker face in Dustypore, Margaret. Don't you know you're the loveliest woman in the place? A tongue like a whiplash, too. . . .'

It was intolerable. I knew what he meant—his precious Private Robinson! I had dealt faithfully with that bad lad in a stormy interview. He had come into the office, aggrieved and ready to give welfare a piece of his mind. An unsavoury gift!

'Mornin', mam.' No salute. I wasn't entitled to one, of course. Eleanore and I weren't commissioned officers, we wore three buttons on our shoulder-tabs instead of stars. But the B.O.R.s and their officers accorded us both the courtesy, unfailingly.

'Good morning. Sit down.'

'This 'ere case o' mine 'as bin proper mucked up by your mob. It's a disgrace——'

'I quite agree,' I had told him crisply. 'A proper disgrace. But we'll put some action into it for you now. Straight away.' His face had brightened and he had leaned his elbows on my table, the better to hear. I had leaned my elbows on the table, too, the better to speak.

'Now tell me, Private Robinson, did you make your wife go on the streets *before* you came out here or *after* you were out here?' There had been several reports from my London H.Q. in the file Ron had passed to me. Illuminating reports, if

common sense and not bias were applied to reading between the carefully worded lines.

But Robinson was what they call 'a tough baby'. No brow-beating for him! 'I ain't come 'ere to be h'insulted. The major

'*Sit down*, Private Robinson. And don't get up again until you're told. How much money has your wife sent you since you've been out here? To help soften the hardships of a poor soldier's life? They call it living off a woman's immoral earnings, Private Robinson. Did you know . . .' I had given him the whole works, as the Yanks say.

'I'm going along to see Major Doyer myself. He will deal with you. Oh, and I shouldn't write any more threatening letters to your wife, if I were you, telling her what you'll do to her when you get home. They may fall into the wrong hands, and the British police take a dim view of a man who . . .' Robinson had a police record, though I did not know that then. He went through the net curtains out into the sunshine.

The major had listened to his share of the works.

'Why the devil can't your people write out straight reports? Carefully worded bunkum! Am I supposed to have the gift of second sight like you? Can't they trust me with a confidential report?'

'No. They have to use the money the public subscribe for the purpose it's subscribed for. Helping the families of serving men. They couldn't afford to fight libel suits, and when they won, it would be a poor advertisement. They're trying to get Mrs. Robinson straightened out. It seems pretty hopeless, but Robinson won't get sent home now, I hope, and if he stops writing threatening letters to her——'

'Who's to stop him? I can't, if that's what you're hinting.'

'I wasn't hinting!' I had been quite indignant. 'I advised him not to, myself.'

'Did you, indeed! By God, if only Stella . . .' He hadn't finished, and I hadn't been interested in any Stellas.

I knew what he meant by 'a tongue like a whiplash' this evening, though. It infuriated me at once.

'You know very well why I don't want you pestering me. I needn't go home in that jeep with you any more, but now I'll have to dance with you, which is worse. I'm a welfare officer, and you're a married man——'

Ron bent his head and whispered, 'But I'm not a married man. Doesn't that make any difference?'

'None at all,' I assured him. He needn't pretend to be a bachelor at this stage!

'You're the limit, Margot! Discussing welfare even on the dance floor!' teased Eleanore as we rejoined our party of six men after the 'Paul Jones'.

Any party with Matron in it was jolly. Any party with Eleanore in it had fun. I added my quota. Ron, leaning against the small bar in the corner, looked on sardonically.

'No more "Paul Jones" for me,' I said firmly when the band began to play the familiar opening bars.

'But you *must*, Margaret.' Matron heaved herself comically to her feet. 'The only excuse is two wooden legs, and even then the Club Committee are empowered to investigate the claim. This is the have-nots dance.'

I joined hands once more in the ladies' circle. Ron stayed leaning against the bar, looking on. The Staff captain faced me when the music stopped. He was a polished performer.

'I'm coming in to see you tomorrow. On business.'

'I don't deal with officers' cases.' I was quite short but he laughed.

'On official business.'

He came into the office next morning. The Brigadier of Dustypore had shown no desire to meet me so far, though I had sent him a most courteous note, telling him when the office would be opening officially. I had begun to fear he shared his Staff captain's jaundiced views on welfare for the troops. Now he was proposing to inspect the premises on the following day, at nine hours.

'You've been having a busy time.' Sulky Face, having delivered his message, was prepared to be affable. 'Saw your light burning several nights late and I came over, but you were engaged.' Had all Dustypore been peering through the doorway after dark? 'Is there anything you need? Got all the trimmings you want? Stationery? Transport?'

'Yes, thank you. *Now*, anyway. I need not bother Sub-Area,' and I gave him a nasty look.

He laughed cheerily. 'Well, we'd no idea there was such a demand for Families' Welfare. It seemed a bit much, planting husband-hunting women on every Command.'

'Husband-hunting women?' So that was it. His rudeness was quite clear now. But husband-hunting women! My nineteen colleagues, steady-eyed and capable! And Eleanore, whose thoughts were always with Jeff.

'I don't know about these other Commands, but if they are anything like Dustypore, it's a bleak outlook for them. Dustypore officers don't include matrimony in their proposals.' A bit sweeping, perhaps, but it was worth it to watch his face.

'I—really—I had no idea,' but I cut him short.

'Tomorrow at nine, you said. Thank you for calling.'

He made a last effort. 'This sob-stuff! It's a bit late now for some of these chaps to go home to do any good. They're not all serious stuff, surely?'

'Most of it isn't. Wives in debt, rent arrears, trouble with neighbours and in-laws, children ill. All the things a man exaggerates into major issues when he's stuck out here and knows his wife can't or won't cope. Things he doesn't like to stand up and recite in front of his C.O. He needs third-party reassurance. But the serious stuff—— If *your* wife were dying of cancer, would you tell yourself it was too late for you to go home? If *your* only son had been sent to a remand home because he had got into bad company while he was an evacuee and because he was now beyond his mother's control, would you wait for normal repatriation happily? If *your* wife had had an illegitimate baby, perhaps a black baby, would you soldier on with a song in your heart? If *your* wife had learned to drink heavily, and had been in and out of prison for the last couple of years and your children were separated, living with foster-parents, would you say, "Time enough, though, to deal with that when I do go home"? Or would *you* be like the B.O.R.s and call it sheer hell?'

'Sheer hell,' he said simply. 'But they could tell that sort of thing to their C.O.s and get action, any time these last six years.'

'Perhaps they could. Some of them got so little action it discouraged others from even trying. They didn't always fancy having their family skeletons lying around in Orderly Rooms, either. The reports from my H.Q. are pouring in now. Every C.O. will be handing in recommendations for compassionate home postings. Who handles those at Sub-Area?'

'I pass them on. If—I think they're serious enough.' We stared hard at each other.

'Those reports are terribly brief sometimes. It's quite a technique, knowing what to stress. If our visitors are really frank and then the B.O.R. doesn't get home, he'll have that extra bit to sweat over. And if bits are left out, it may not look serious enough. You have to use some imagination, to fill out the story behind.' This chap looked as if he could, if only he would. 'You have to imagine it's your own case and work it out from there.' Had I said enough? 'Gunner Doone's wife had both hands blown off in 1942. His battery was on the retreat through Burma. She was convalescent by the time he heard. Her mother looked after her, wrote her letters. Her mother died suddenly and Mrs. Doone was alone. Families'

Welfare took her over, put her into a Home.' It was a long story, I must cut it as short as I could. 'They pressed for Doone to be compassionately posted home. It was refused because the gunner wouldn't be discharged at home and, as a serving soldier, he would be of no practical help to his wife. The loving companionship for a maimed woman didn't enter into it. Welfare kept on trying until Mrs. Doone herself took a hand in it.' The Staff captain winced. 'One of her stumps had had to be reopened, and after that the arm had to come off, up to the elbow. She said she didn't want her husband to come home then. Not until she could use her artificial arm properly. She said she wanted to have two whole arms to put round her husband when she met him.' I remembered Gunner Doone's face when he had heard that bit. It had gone granite hard. 'Two *whole* arms to put round me,' he had repeated. 'GAWD ALMIGHTY!' and he had gone out quickly.

'Is she—is the case still closed?'

'Her arms are ready and the gunner is going home in about two months. On *normal* repatriation.'

'You take all these cases of yours very much to heart, don't you?' The Staff captain was looking at me intently.

'I wear the blue beret,' I told him proudly. And then, feeling I had been over-dramatic, added, 'Now, would you care for a cup of tea?'

'Er—yes. Please.'

'Put the kettle on in the back room, then. Just half-fill it, at the tap. The cake's in that box on the window-ledge.' He could make quite a good cup of tea, and he stopped looking like a Staff captain as he sat, eating his cake and trying not to drop too many crumbs.

'Does the Brigadier have the last word on carpets in Dustypore? I mean, could he just say, "Give her," meaning me, "a carpet," and it would be done?'

'We—ell—'

'That's the only trimming my little C.O. can't conjure up. Just look at that hole. Half my clients catch their boots in it, and I don't want this brigadier chap sprawling across my table.'

'Why not trim the edges, then?'

I took away his cup of tea at once and handed him my nail-scissors. After a few minutes' hacking he straightened the carpet out again. It was a decided improvement. 'The hole isn't quite in the centre. Perhaps I should just——?' He looked at me for consent. He hacked again, and the hole, now twice the size, filled the centre of the floor. 'Almost looks as if it's meant to be there. I'd better not tell my wife about this, or

she'll give me all these jobs when I go home.' Satisfied, he sat down again to his tea.

'It's too neat-looking now. I'll fray out the edges a bit for tomorrow. I can trim it up again after he's gone. Another inch or so can't matter now. I specially want a new carpet, to leave the office smart for my relief.'

'Your relief?'

'A new batch of us husband-hunters is on the high seas now. One of them is coming up here, and I'm being posted back to Bombay.'

'Oh. Your posting notice hasn't reached us yet.'

'What does it matter? Sub-Area couldn't care less,' I laughed. 'The only difference will be her name.'

'By the way,' he remarked as he was leaving. 'Suspend all interviews until 9.30 tomorrow.'

This was too much. 'What rot! If I'm in the middle of an interview, the B.O.R. can just step outside.'

I did a little spring-cleaning for the occasion myself, nevertheless. I took the net curtains home with me that evening. Somewhere or other I had read that glue makes a good substitute for starch, so I poured all the office glue into the rinsing water. It was a great success, the net was beautifully stiff, but the inside of my tin tub was 'tacky' for months afterwards. The *mali* promised to supply a super bunch of flowers, and the corporal next door cleaned and oiled the typewriter. The stone floor of the office was never washed, and apart from dusting the table and chairs twice instead of once, there was nothing more I could do to honour my Brigadier.

'Forty-eight hours' leave at last!' I informed the sparrows, kneeling on the bedroom floor, ironing away at the net curtains. 'Tomorrow night I shut up shop at four o'clock, and you can all sleep as late as you like Saturday morning and Sunday. You won't have me back again until midnight on Sunday.' 'Yippee!' I added as an afterthought, and was immediately shocked into silence as an answering 'Yippee' came back through the wall. The major of Intelligence next door, behaving like a six-year-old.

'The Brig. calls on me today,' I boasted to Eleanore at breakfast. 'Did you promise to come to the station to see me off or not?'

'Your six weeks' appro. period is up. He made me wait six weeks, too. You won't have to come out of your office to let him go in, as I had to,' she grinned. 'Yes, I'm coming to the station. The eight o'clock, isn't it?'

'The four o'clock. The eight's too late; it gets in after midnight.'

'Oh,' Eleanore sounded blank. 'Ron Dover was asking. He's going down to Bombay. I didn't think you'd catch the early one; it's a slow train.'

'Eleanore, will you do me a favour? If Major Dover rechecks train times with you today, stick to the late one, will you?'

'Yes,' said Eleanore. 'I see.'

The truck-driver stared at the curtains. 'Hand those up to me, and don't you dare crush them.' I laid them carefully across his arm and climbed up into the front seat.

'Just like Ma's spring-cleaning,' he assured me and handed them up gingerly. The *mali* hurried across with his flowers and off we went. I had time to hear all about the wedding-cake the driver's Ma planned to make for him, if only he would bring home enough dried fruit and icing sugar. He was whistling the Wedding March as we drew up at the office block.

Great activity was in progress up and down the entire front veranda. Brooms were raising dust-clouds which almost hid the sweepers. Chairs and tables were scattered around. The sergeant explained it all to me later. 'Brigadiers are b——s! You never know with them, mam. He might have done us as well as you.'

My office door was still closed and padlocked.

The driver took the flowers in one hand and the curtains over one arm, and I hurried over to put a stop to all this industry and give the dust a chance to get settled before I began my own chores. As I stepped on to the veranda, the nearest B.O.R. laid down his broom and I handed over the padlock key. Wordlessly and without his usual cheery smile, he jerked his head towards a figure standing against the wall. I had not noticed this B.O.R. amidst the dust, but I did notice something else now. There was uproar certainly but no cheerfully sung out 'Good morning, mam'.

The figure stepped forward and held out a paper, a cable, to me.

I read it. 'AMY DIED SUDDENLY LOOKING AFTER MAIMIE CAN YOU COME HOME SEND FUNERAL INSTRUCTIONS SYMPATHY WILKINSON.'

'Your wife?' His head nodded while his hands twisted and wrung the felt Burma hat he had taken off. 'Just go inside and sit down.'

I followed him in and was turning to close the doors when

the truck-driver, still whistling the Wedding March, came forward.

'Fer Chrissake, shut yer b—— trap,' hissed a voice.

My driver held out the curtains and flowers, silent. There were only two chairs in the office, so I grabbed the net and the bouquet, threw them hurriedly on to the floor in the corner and closed the doors without more ado.

'Number, name, rank, regiment, camp, home address, religion. . . .' The quiet voice supplied them all without emotion.

'Relations? Your mother, hers, anybody closely related at all?' A headshake. 'No one at all?'

'Just—her aunt. She's nearly eighty.'

'This Wilkinson?'

'Neighbours. They live below us, the flat below.'

I had to get confirmation from my London H.Q. before any action could be taken. A signal would not be quick enough, the Signals Unit were not then the firm allies and abettors they later became. I should have to cable.

'CONFIRM RETURN WIFE DIED CHILD MAIMIE CARE NEIGHBOURS FLAT BELOW NO NEAR RELATIVES.'

'Just a moment while I get this off at once,' and I went outside.

The driver was standing alone further along the veranda, kicking with quiet venom at a post. I had forgotten to dismiss him officially. The chairs and tables had all disappeared and the dust was clearing. He came forward eagerly. I signed his time-sheet.

'Will you be passing the post office hut? This cable is urgent.'

He seized it, saluted and was half-way across the road before I could say more. I ran after him. 'The money—you'll have to pay——'

'Got some in me pocket.'

'Get a sending receipt——' The truck went off with a roar.

He still sat quietly in the chair, with that dreadful air of calm. The worst part of the interview had now to come. I had to make him talk; talk or cry and preferably both, to ease his agony of mind. I must break down that icy air of calm, and this office was the only place in Dustypore where he could have time and peace to express his grief in what is called 'an unmanly fashion'.

He gave me further details for his case-card. Records must be kept, regardless. Overseas: 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ years. Leave: None. Age of wife: 31. Number of children: 1. Sex (of child or children):

Female. Name or names: Amy Joan. Age or ages: 3 years, 4 months.

'We call her Maimie not to confuse her with the wife . . .'
The same thought came to both of us; I saw it in his eyes and I looked away. We talked.

He looked straight at me when the first tear rolled, tried to wipe it defiantly with the back of his hand, then laid his head down on my table and his shoulders heaved.

Men cried very quietly, in Dustypore.

I got up and walked over to the door, to stop anyone else from coming in. The heap of curtains brought me up short. The Brigadier! Even while I looked down, a sharp command rang out along the veranda. I felt very breathless. The cable and the case-card lay beside the bowed head. I carefully picked them up, and as the Staff captain pushed open the doors, met the Brigadier on the threshold and shushed him to silence. Whether he meant to salute or shake hands or both, did not matter, his right hand was in mid-air as I thrust cable and card into it.

With the two papers in his hand, the Brigadier looked beyond me. He took it all in, the heap of net and the jumbled flowers, the hole in the carpet specially frayed out. His glance lingered on the heaving shoulders, but Private Dean was unaware. His shattered world held only Amy and a motherless little girl.

The Brigadier did not speak. He read the cable, glanced in again at the table and began on the case-card.

We waited.

The Staff captain's smile had gone, the colonel standing behind stared stonily at his Brigadier's neck, my own little C.O. looked at me. Two lorries roared past; round the back of the block someone was half-whistling, half-singing, with exaggerated nostalgic tremors, ' . . . blue birds over . . . white cliffs of Dover . . . tomorrow . . . just you wait and see . . . '

The great man moved back on to the veranda and signed to me to follow. We paced along for a few steps before he stopped and asked quietly, 'What have you done? About this, I mean?' flapping the cable.

'I've cabled London for confirmation. This cable isn't sufficient evidence for any action.'

'And that lad in there?'

'He'll get a grip on himself shortly. He'll wash his face under the tap in my back room and have a cup of tea with me. He needn't leave until he feels he can face his mates with some composure. Maimie will have to go into one of our homes for

these motherless tots. But—I'd like to be able to tell him he will be put forward for compassionate repatriation. That'll help him, a little.' I paused and then blurted out: 'Can't he go home *before* she's buried? It's such a long time since he saw her. His memories must have faded, and it sometimes helps, if we can just see our dead.' Peter's mother had sat staring into space, muttering over and over again, 'It's the not knowing *how*—he went . . . not being able to whisper good-bye . . .'

I waited, but the Brigadier said nothing further at all. He saluted me formally, I bowed in return and waited politely while he walked right down the veranda and turned the corner. The others followed.

The Brigadier of Dũstypore made no more visits of inspection to the office of Families' Welfare. But he did his stuff, nobly, and his punches carried more weight than mine.

Private Dean was repatriated by airlift. I gave him a letter to show to any R.A.F. personnel he encountered *en route*.

'To the O.C. concerned, R.A.F. Command. The bearer of this is going home on compassionate repatriation, after nearly three years' service overseas without leave. He may with luck and your co-operation see his wife again before she is buried. I send you my grateful thanks in advance.'

'Will you remember to write and tell me if the letter is a help? I can go ahead and do the same for other chaps like you, if it is.'

Private Dean did remember to write. The R.A.F. had co-operated. They even had a car waiting, to rush him home, when he touched down in U.K. Maimie was settling down nicely in the Home and Dean was stationed handy, so he could visit her and take her out whenever he was off duty. . . .

Eleanore and I were waiting for the *tonga* to take us to the station when the phone call came from the hospital.

'Remember Private Orr?' Maŕron's voice on the line. 'It's the end, either tonight or tomorrow. You said you wanted to be told. Cheerio,' and she rang off. I had forgotten Private Orr. He was nineteen and the eldest of six. He was dying of dysentery and anæmia. I had written his home mail for him on three Sundays. I had more time for such things than the overworked nurses. Last Sunday I had had to tell his widowed mother ' . . . it is kinder to be frank with you. There is now no hope at all. I will try to be at his bedside when the time comes, if it is humanly possible.' A promise given when I had not supposed it would interfere with my own plans. I couldn't do anything about it now.

'You'll come back fat and bloated, I suppose,' joked Eleanore, as we swayed about in the *tonga*, rattling along the road at a decent pace for once. 'Breakfast in bed, full-size baths and water which lathers instead of going all scummy!' She had had no leave out of Dustypore since she arrived. She knew no one in Bombay and would have had to live in the Women's Services Hostel there, going around on her own or dependent on casual introductions from the other Service girls. We could not go on leave together as one of us had to be on tap in Dustypore, but when I was settled in Bombay, I hoped that Isabel would welcome Eleanore to stay sometimes.

The train was already in. In fact, it was almost already out. The Eurasian guard had raised his flag, but he lowered it when he saw us.

'“Ladies only”! In here, Margaret,' panted Eleanore and wrenched at a door. In went the canvas hold-all, and I followed helter-skelter up the two high steps. The door was still swinging wide as the train began to move, but I leaned out of it to wave.

'Careful; you'll go overboard,' remarked a voice behind me, and an arm shot out past me to catch the door. I turned quickly, to face a tall naval officer.

Still breathless, I began to say, 'But it's——'

'Ladies only,' he finished for me. 'I'm next door officially, but the *purdah* party in there can't read English, it seems, and they'd got all their bedding nicely spread out when I arrived on the scene in Delhi. They wouldn't budge and they wouldn't speak to the guard or me, so'—he shrugged comically—'here I am! I can easily move out at the next stop if you object. This train stops every hundred yards!'

'Oh, I don't mind at all,' I smiled back. 'It isn't as if we had to sleep together all night.' Then, realizing how this must sound, I hastily added, 'I mean—what I meant to say was, the journey won't be long enough to——'

'I know what you meant,' he put in easily, and without a smile. 'I must say I'll be glad when this trip is over. Two days and two nights, from Delhi! All the fast trains with the air-conditioned coaches were booked, so it had to be this one. . . .' He talked on, to put me at my ease. It was no use being standoffish, we should be together in this room-like compartment for nearly six hours, and the place was strewn with his belongings: his shaving kit on the collapsible table and his pyjamas thrown on top of an open suitcase. He hadn't expected a fellow passenger like me and had put off tidying up until the

last possible moment, just like a man on his own. He was wearing white shorts and an open-necked white shirt, with Commander's rank stripes on the shoulder-tabs.

'Would you mind telling me what those initials stand for? ATS, WAAF, WRNS, FANY, WAC(I), I know them all, but yours——?'

'Families' Welfare. The three buttons make me a non-commissioned captain.'

'Stationed in Dustypore?'

'Just now I am. I'm being posted to Bombay shortly.'

There would be plenty of time for small talk after sunset. Unless we both read solidly or sat and stared across at one another, we should have to talk then. I turned sideways to look out of the window.

'You can't be very comfortable like that. Here, let me push this bedding roll behind you and my pillow—lean back on that, with your feet up.' It was certainly a great improvement, I was so comfortable I should probably fall asleep. 'Care to smoke?' and he offered his cigarette tin.

'I don't smoke, thanks. You have one, though.'

'I'd rather have my pipe, if you don't mind?'

He stretched out on the opposite seat, with a suitcase behind him, lit his pipe and picked up his book. I wondered idly if he were stationed in Bombay and if I should have dealings with him down there.

I had interviewed only one sailor, for welfare. We had had to make visits at home, as part of our training course, and the reports we had turned in had been carefully scrutinized. My first visit had concerned A.B. Throstle. By what he had called a ruddy miracle of seamanship, his ship had arrived in port and he had gone home on fourteen days' leave, just in time to look after their three-year-old daughter while his wife went into hospital to have a second baby. She and the new babe had returned before his leave was up, and all was going well until Mrs. Throstle had contracted puerperal fever. Throstle had requested an extension of leave until his mother-in-law could come over from Ireland, and Families' Welfare had been asked to visit and report urgently. I had been very nervous. No one had answered my knock so I had gone round to the back. The A.B. had shouted to me to open the door and come in. He was sitting on a stool in the living-room, holding a very red-faced infant in a most peculiar position. The three-year-old leaned against his shoulder, sucking her thumb.

'Pleased to see you, miss. Sit down, and I'll be with you in a minute.' I had been anxious to be helpful, though.

'I've brought a form for you to fill in. I could hold the baby for you while you do it?'

'Right, you are. Better put that towel on your knees first——' and baby and pot had been transferred to me. Throstle took a pen and a bottle of ink from the mantelpiece and got down to his form.

'He's finished,' he remarked, lifting his eyes for one brief glance.

Certainly the little face was no longer red.

'Fetch the nappy for the lady, pet,' urged Dad to the three-year-old. The nappy was warming on the fender before the fire. I knew the programme from this point on.

'Safety-pins, please?'

A.B. Throstle unfastened two large ones from under his square collar.

He had been granted an extension of leave, ten days, and I had been cautioned by the instructress not to write such fulsome reports. 'The domesticated Royal Navy! This tall commander was almost certain to be married. Dark-haired, tanned, with a cleft in his chin and a twinkle in his eye, some girl must have commandeered him by now. Where did he store the family safety-pins, on leave?'

'You can't sit there laughing and not tell me the joke?'

'Oh! I was just wondering where you——' Sanity returned just in time.

'Where I . . . ?'

'Where you—where you're stationed?' A poor effort but he accepted it without comment.

'Bombay. What exactly does this job of yours cover?'

I explained, briefly. 'Will I be allowed to go on board the ships, to interview sailors, in Bombay?'

He laughed outright at that. 'I—hardly think so. They'd be delighted to see you, of course. But the Admiral——' He paused. 'Does the Merchant Navy come under your wing, too?' Changing the subject!

'They *used* to, in London.' We discussed the Shipping Pool and its set-up, then drifted on to other subjects.

'You haven't been out here very long, then?' he asked.

'Less than two months. We were still at sea on V.E. day, actually. It was tremendous. Where were you that day?'

'At sea.' But he didn't elaborate. I began to tell him about S.S. *Malaya*.

'One of the anti-aircraft gunners on board spent all his spare time embroidering. A table-cloth, of all things! He started it early on in the war, working from the outside border inwards,

so that he could stop at any time, when we won. He was only half-way round the edge when his ship was sunk. "When I comes to, in hospital, there it was, on the locker alongside my bunk," he told us. That was in Halifax. The sea-water had shrunk it a little, but none of the silks had run. The nurses ironed it out for him, and he bought a little waterproof bag to keep it in, just in case. He was back in that very same hospital three weeks later. "But me cloth was safe and sound. Brought me luck, it has." The nurses ironed it out for him again, and I wonder what they thought about that piece of coarse linen. Once the gunner and a few survivors were picked up, after what he called "a spell on a raft". "I has a dekko at it once or twice to keep me spirits up and show Hitler what was what," he assured us. He was laughing, but the other gunners never joked about that cloth. One of them gave us the rest of the raft story. "His needle was adrift, or he'd have done a bit of this buttonholing stuff, sittin' level with the Atlantic. A Dutchey picked them up, and when they stripped old Joe, a piece of purple thread was sticking out of his chest. They hauled on it and out comes his needle." When Joe showed us the cloth, it was nearly all filled in with embroidery and he had got 1939-194 all ready in the very centre. "I'm improvisating now, marking time like. Wisht I'd a been a better fist at it them early days. 'I've improved too much.'" He certainly had! The first border was roughly done, but the centre ones were a work of art, intricate and just beautiful. When the news of V.E. day came over the ship's intercom, there was cheering and a hullabaloo at first, then someone shouted "The CLOTH! There's the CLOTH!" and there it was, flapping merrily at the mast-head. It was the right place for it. It seemed so typical of the war itself, clumsily begun and then all the detailed planning at the end, at the centre. We all looked up at it and then we were all singing "God Save the King", standing to attention under a table-cloth which had fought out the war with us. It ought to go into a museum, that embroidered square. It's priceless and irreplaceable! The modern "England expects every man . . ."

'So is the Merchant Navy,' this commander said quietly, and he stared out of the window. 'Priceless and irreplaceable. But nobody can put it in a museum. Or off the seas either. I hope the gunner has his tea on his cloth every night for the rest of his life.'

'Merchant Navy Air-Gunner Joseph Land! He's a sugar-boiler and he's going back to it. In a chocolate factory. I told him I'd think of him every time I ate a chocolate.'

'Think of him now, then.' He rummaged in a suitcase and handed me a slab of chocolate. We laughed together, and he went back to his reading and I looked out of the window. But the train was running now through a series of tunnels cut in the rock. I shut my eyes and went back to Dustypore.

Major Ronald Dover was fast becoming a nuisance. His persistence was frightening as well as annoying. Brushing those other chaps aside in the 'Paul Jones' as if he owned me! And trying to travel down to Bombay with me! I was glad I had escaped six hours in a railway carriage with him, at night. What had he meant, he wasn't a married man? Private Orr had been in Ron's regiment. Had been? He still was, until tonight or tomorrow morning. Matron would write to his mother; she always did. So would Ron and the regimental padre. But they hadn't promised his mother; it would be kindly routine to them. 'It's the not knowing *how* . . . he went . . .' Mrs. Orr would wait for a letter from Families' Welfare, to tell her *how*. The very name 'Families' Welfare' would be a comfort to her. Eleanore would have gone to the hospital willingly, if only I had mentioned it to her. Perhaps if I phoned her as soon as I reached Bombay . . . There were too many snags in that plan. The manager might not be in his office or might not hear the phone. And Eleanore had to go to a Sergeants' Mess dance tonight, anyway. She might not get the message in time. Resentful, I thought up every possible reason for not doing anything about Private Orr.

The train roared out of one tunnel, ran between rock walls for a few yards and then shrieked in warning before plunging into another. The smoke from the commander's pipe drifted upwards in a blue haze, to be sucked into the whirling blades of the ceiling fans and beaten madly into nothingness. I couldn't do anything about Private Orr now even if I wanted to.

The train was slowing down; it crawled out of the tunnel and then stopped.

'Another water-tank! That engine will end up with rusted insides,' the commander, leaning out of his window, informed me.

A water-tank but a level crossing, too! 'With an army truck pulled up in the road, waiting, its driver leaning against the bonnet, smoking a cigarette. That truck was headed back to Dustypore, and I knew that driver.

I opened the door and was bending to jump out when arms came right round me and I was lifted back inside. 'Why?' demanded the commander. 'I told you *I'd* clear out.' I was looking up into very chilly blue eyes. 'Why?' he repeated. So I didn't waste time struggling, I told him, quickly.

'No. It's too risky, in that truck with——'

'But I know the driver. He's the one with the currants. Taking them home, I mean. For his cake. I MUST go, I wouldn't enjoy my leave.'

'The guard's on the other side, I saw him. Hurry, then. . . .' He helped me down and waited while I ran across to the gate, climbed over and stood panting beside the driver. He swung himself back into the carriage as the train shuddered and drew itself together to move on. I waved to him and sundry other curious out-thrust heads. I waved until the last carriage went trundling past and the stutters beside me had developed into astonished speech.

'Mam——' began the driver.

'I just forgot something and I have to go back for it.'

'Bessie all over! Sideways round the bend! You——' He stopped. 'Beg your pardon, mam. Bessie's my girl. She——' I heard all about Bessie.

I phoned Isabel. Charles would meet the train and get my canvas hold-all from the Commander. I had forgotten to bring it back to Dustypore.

I went, then, to the hospital.

Private Orr did not die until dawn on Sunday.

The death-bed mosquito tent was slung from hooks in the ceiling beams, to lie in crisp folds on the stone floor. Inside it there was room for Matron, the regimental padre and me, to sit by the bedside. 'I can't tell his mother about this,' I thought and watched Matron pass the sponge again and again over the still face, wiping away the sweat-beads as they formed. 'It's like being in a hot tomb, inside here.' The electric night-light was turned away from the bed. Its beam shone only on the padre's clasped hands and the gold lettering of the book, closed on his knee.

The birds were already stirring and twittering in the trees outside when Robert Orr, aged nineteen, dying a private in the army of His Majesty King George VI, told me what to say to his mother.

'MUM . . . MUM . . . I DID win those marbles. . . .'

He was buried a few hours later, before the sun had time to rise to scorching strength. Every man in his regiment went with him, a solid brotherhood, those last three miles of his earthly journey to that lonely little cemetery. For a hundred and fifty years the bugle-calls in Dustypore had sent rippling echoes over the quiet mounds, and their message had not changed. The dance-tunes from the Clubhouse on the hilltop above changed with each new generation, but the music purged

itself of clamour and drifted down in a hushed serenade over the sleeping warriors.

Private Orr lay at the feet of Fusilier O'Flaherty, who had died of cholera in 1797.

The four lorries came bumpily along the track and slowed to a halt. Eighteen men climbed out and set to work.

'Reporting with two hundred and seventy-one, mam,' said their sergeant.

'All right; you know what to do. The same arrangement as last time. It came out very well,' I told him. 'Are they all marked this time?'

'All marked with their names, mam,' he assured me, grim-faced.

Dustypore cemetery was bare of flowers and plants and, except in monsoon time, even of coarse grass. Just crosses and stony earth. But relatives treasured photographs of their loved ones' graves; especially of graves which they could never hope to visit, such as those in Dustypore, India. For their sakes a deception was staged which would surely be forgiven. Every pot-plant, flower and shrub and fern, from every home and Mess in Dustypore, was loaned gladly; for one short half-hour, until the photographs had been taken, the barren little corner became a garden. Two hundred and seventy-one flower-pots were camouflaged into the landscape, under the expert eye of the sergeant, who in Civvy Street was managing director of a famous firm of nursery gardeners.

'I'll go round with them myself tonight, mam,' he promised me, as the four lorries backed slowly down the track to the main road, the foliage waving crazily over their sides. Because last time there had been a hitch. Mrs. Captain George had grumbled that Mrs. Major James had received her pot of fairy fern.

In the midst of life we are in death, and in the midst of both, possessions loom large.

Even a fairy fern. . . .

Chapter 7

The blow fell on the following Saturday afternoon, just after I had washed my hair.

The monsoon rain was sluicing down outside, making up for the ten-day lull. The wind blew it across the corrugated-iron roof with a crackling sound, and the driveway was a

muddy stream. The sparrows flew in and out, ruffling their feathers to shake off the raindrops. They were much with me these days, the sparrows. They knew enough to come in out of the rain, unlike a great many of the master race.

Morose faces came and went at the tent openings. Any home mail written this afternoon would have a bitter edge to it all right. Socks hung outside each tent in sodden lumps. Their owners, seeking feminine guidance on the matter, had left them 'out', after my assurance that the soft rain-water could do nothing but good. It might even help the hard, bumpy bits. Also acting on my advice, the owners leaned out to lift them occasionally, to give the foot part a good pull to stretch them. Misgivings came to me now and then—those socks needed a miracle, not a downpour, for restorative purposes.

A mouth-organ played us extracts from *The Merry Widow*, but there was no whistling in harmony. Our morale was too low.

Tip and Run crouched inside the kennel, with just their noses showing. Run did not like these rainy days; they made him cold and miserable. He had braved the passage across the mud, skipping over, to shake hands and collect the after-lunch rations of chocolate. He wore a little cholera belt I had made for him, in flannel, and sat with his paws tucked down inside it, like a very old man with his hands in his pockets.

I hummed the 'Merry Widow Valse' as I rubbed briskly at my scalp. My hair took time to dry; it was so long.

At five o'clock my little C.O. would be calling for me, to give me a lift down to Bombay in his car. He had asked me that morning if I would like to go. 'I shall be staying down there for a few days, so you'll have to make your own plans for the return trip, but you're welcome to a seat down—very welcome.'

'Thanks; I'd love to come. Actually I had thought of going down this week-end, but my transfer will be through any day now. I didn't use my leave pass last week-end; I can just alter the date on it.'

'H-rumph, h-rumph. Not usual to alter dates on a leave-pass, not usual.' A tactful under-statement!

'I'm not an officer; they can't court-martial me. I'll give in my notice if they do,' I had smiled. I wondered why the little man did not say he was sorry I was leaving Dustypore. Personalities didn't enter into welfare work, and I supposed he couldn't care less who sat in his loaned bedroom, so long as she did her work well.

Charles had collected my bag and sent it back to me, after phoning for instructions. 'The commander chap was going to

return it to you himself, though you'd forgotten to put a label on the thing. He seemed to think he could trace you easily enough. . . . Charles must have helped out with my name, because the commander chap had written, a short note, hoping that I had got back to Dustypore without mishap and promising any help and support in his power when I came to Bombay. The signature had been 'John Douglas'. I wondered casually what Mrs. John Douglas was like, wrote down his name and address in my diary for future reference and tore up the note.

Aunt Katrine had given me an outsize bottle of my favourite perfume, 'Pink Lilac', as her parting gift. But Eleanore and I favoured the 'well-scrubbed look' in our journeyings around Dustypore; anything savouring of 'provocative allure' was ruled firmly out! Though it stood unused on my chest of drawers, the level of the scent in the bottle was steadily falling from heat evaporation. A sheer waste, I told myself, eyeing the bottle, as I swung my hair round in great sweeps as a change from towelling it dry. Why not use some of it as a scalp friction now? Only a faint fragrance would be left when the car called for me.

The bedroom had begun to smell like Harrods' perfumery department when the truck drove up outside and the rat-tat sounded on the veranda door. It was my old friend, the saintly sergeant of the skeleton 'caur'.

'Come to take you to Sub-Area, mam. Brigadier wants to see you.'

'But my hair's not nearly dry, and I can't come with it wrapped in this towel.'

He scratched his ear. 'You'll have to come when the Brig. sends for you.'

'Can't you go back and explain to him?'

The sergeant said he wouldn't care to do any such thing.

'Did he say any special time to you?'

'I took my orders from the Staff captain, mam. "Take a truck and fetch her straight away," ses he.'

I shut the window with an exasperated bang. Didn't this brigadier chap know that you can't just send for a woman and expect her to drop everything and come a-running? A woman's not a man, even though she's in the army. I remembered then that I hadn't any uniform to wear either. Three of my uniform dresses were at the *dherzi's* (Indian tailor) being repaired; he had called for them less than an hour ago. The others were at the *dhobi's*, and he wasn't due to deliver them for another two hours at least. Plan ahead as I might, the British Army always caught me off balance!

A cotton frock without a hat was hardly suitable, even if my hair had been presentable. Black was considered right for most occasions, and I had a black outfit. Isabel had told me to bring out something smart, for 'cooler weather', race-meetings, et cetera. The two-piece suit had been bought in Paris, in the summer before the war. It looked *à la Parisienne*! So did the hat, small, with eye-veil! Silk stockings, gloves, handbag and high-heeled court shoes, and I was ready.

The sergeant whistled, then bowed me to the truck, beret clasped to chest. The skirt was too tight for the high step up so he most gallantly bent the knee. Nevertheless, he thought the outfit most unsuitable, and hinted at it tactfully. 'It'll be an official interview, mam. He's a stickler for discipline and everything done proper and official.'

'Is Captain Tarling at Sub-Area, too?' I asked hopefully.

'No, mam. She wasn't being posted,' began the sergeant and then stopped. But my worry disappeared; it must be my posting, through at last. And this rig-out of mine, for an official interview, would supply added warmth to my Brigadier's 'godspeed'. I was able to relax.

Alongside, the sergeant was making offensive noises.

'Anything adrift, sergeant?'

His nose was up like a pointer's. 'This won't go down well in the transport compound, mam.'

'What won't? Oh, you mean the perfume?'

'What's its name, mam? Frenchy stuff?'

'Pink Lilac. *English* Pink Lilac. Don't worry, though, once I get out, the air will clear quickly.'

'Will it?' and now he was disappointed. There's no pleasing a British Army sergeant.

Saturday afternoon seemed to be like any weekday at Sub-Area. The Orderly Room gaped, then sniffed with closed eyes.

High heels tapping, I was conducted along the veranda and settled in a chair right outside the great man's door. The rain fell heavily outside. Voices were talking in the room just behind, and I tried not to listen, counting the raindrops as they seeped through a hole in the roof above. Drops from my sodden hair were trickling down inside my neck... one hundred and five, one hundred and six—I was getting quite dizzy with it when a voice said very clearly, 'I'll sign those later.' Another voice: 'Captain Michaelis will be waiting for you now, sir.' That was me; I was indeed waiting. 'Oh, I'll see her now, then. Fix the court-martial for Monday. . . .'

Every damp hair on my scalp frizzled and dried. Court-martialled! On Monday! I must be sitting here waiting to be

taken into custody, then. In a black two-piece and hat with eye-veil! Tamely sitting waiting to be taken prisoner. I wouldn't allow it! I must get in my letter of resignation first—'Deteriorating health compels me' sort of stuff. If I left quietly, they might think I hadn't arrived.

I began to tiptoe cautiously along the veranda.

The window of the Orderly Room across the square filled magically with heads, their silly, popping eyes following my progress step by step.

The door behind opened suddenly.

'The Brigadier will see you now. Will you come in, please?'

Court-martial. Just like the dentist without the literature.

I went in.

The judge rose courteously to his feet and shook my hand. He sniffed, then checked himself quickly. The Staff captain was saying something behind me, but how could he expect me to defend myself back and front? A chair struck the back of my legs with some violence, and I sat down. I rose again quickly. Prisoners always stood, and I would keep to the book of rules; the Staff captain was about two months late with his chair, anyway.

'Please sit down.' The judge overruled me.

'Now, Mrs. Michaelis, I have been in touch with your Delhi H.Q. and they agree with me it would be in the best interests of welfare if you . . .' They would, of course; the two bricks smashed beyond repair must have rankled. Perhaps that contractor chap had charged them up as gold bricks. ' . . . efficiency in every branch of the service. Unorthodox methods are not usually . . .' They had found me out in Dustypore, too. ' . . . and warm-hearted impulse can be the greatest . . .' Court-martialled for warm-hearted impulses! Aunt Katrine would never get me persuaded to join the army again. Would they ship me home or let me stay with Isabel, if I refunded my passage money? ' . . . and returning by truck was completely outside your prescribed welfare duties . . .' The Gestapo must have trained its smartest men in Dustypore. Only Eleanore, Matron, that padre and the truck-driver knew I had jumped off the train to return from leave. This Brigadier must be an officious old gossip! ' . . . you will remain here pending further orders.' He paused, waiting. What did one say to an officious old gossip who had just wiped the floor with one and was, withal, one's superior officer?

'Thank you,' was what I said, adding with trembling sarcasm, 'sir!'

'I understand that you have a special request to make to me?'

I shall be happy to hear it, Mrs. Michaelis.' He paused expectantly, but this time he had stumped me completely. I did want to sit with my head in my hands, but not in here beside him.

He rose and seemed to be trying to smile. 'No doubt you will repeat your request to Captain Wordison.' We shook hands once more.

I staggered to the door, the Staff captain supporting me by the elbow. Once outside, he began to reprove me.

'I like very high heels on a woman myself, but you shouldn't wear them if you can't walk on them. The old boy rather fancied your perfume, what?' Pink Lilac and courts-martial! What an army!

'What do I do now? Until Monday?'

'I don't know—what do you usually do?'

'You mean I can move about freely?'

'What are you talking about? If your feet——'

I began to be firm with him. 'This court-martial on Monday. What do I . . . ' He understood at last.

'Eavesdropping, eh? You mean to say you weren't listening to a single word of the old boy's speech? I wish I dared tell him that! He was handing you a bouquet, not a raspberry—you're so efficient he won't have you posted to Bombay—your methods are effective, and he admires your warm-hearted impulses. That Orr business.'

'Then—I can't go to Bombay, after all?'

'No. You're here for keeps. He was waiting for you to demand a new carpet. I wondered why you held back.'

'I was counting on—Bombay. I've got relations there.'

'A pity, but if you will spike your own guns!' He shrugged heartlessly. 'Anyway, you heard what the Brig. said: you can have forty-eight hours' leave every second week-end. Didn't you hear that either?'

Eleanore was drying her hair, too, when I banged on her door. She listened sympathetically, and then told me how sorry she was and how glad!

The *dhobi* brought the washing on time, for once. He had overstarched everything as usual and I felt as if I were walking around inside the dress. It crackled ominously as I sat down beside the little G.O. in the back seat. That would be the very last straw, if my own uniform broke into pieces about my ears.

He smoked a cigar and we chatted companionably.

The rain came down, thick needles of glimmering water which splintered on the stones of the road. We had to go slow

until we got below the heavy rain-belt, twisting and turning in the hairpin bends of the descent. Water gushed down the hill-sides and the roaring music of its passage often drowned our voices. Sometimes the torrents leaped dizzily across the road herding great boulders to fling them to greater destruction, down the further slopes. The driver, Lester, accelerated then, and we fled quickly beneath these waterfalls, in case a boulder should be released too soon. More often, the waters gurgled under our wheels and the tyres sucked squelchily for a more solid hold.

We passed two army trucks, labouring upwards with steaming radiators and cheerful B.O.R. drivers. They dimmed their roof searchlights and drew in to the side to let us pass, shouting warnings of rockfalls and boulders further down.

'Poor devils, poor devils!' sympathized the little C.O. 'On a night like this.'

'Yes, indeed,' I told him. 'That second chap's a baker in Civvy Street. Any sensible army would put him in their Catering Corps.'

A dozen times the colonel and Lester got out, to shoulder masses of splintered rock aside. And once, when the mass seemed immovable, the colonel ordered Lester and me to stand clear, while he set the bonnet of the car against it, engine full speed ahead, and only the set of his shoulders in the dimness showing how grimly he gripped the handbrake. The boulder shuddered over the edge and the little C.O. swung his wheel and needed forty yards and one hairpin bend to draw to a standstill. Before we followed, we looked at the wheel-marks at that edge.

'Blimey!' breathed Lester, flashing his torch, 'less than a foot! He should have let me . . .'

No helpful signs, no safety rails, on this, the Dustypore road. Just one strict code: down drivers must clear all obstructions off the track and up drivers try to do it when they could.

'Didn't realize it would be as bad as this; had no idea, no idea,' worried the colonel, as he and Lester and I ate sandwiches and drank coffee, in our twenty-horse-power Noah's ark. 'Make up time on the flat, though; make up time on the flat.' We did, streaking along, the sea and the railway lines on our right, and squalid India, spotted with rude hut encampments, on our left.

The lights blazed in the bungalow as the car came to a stop under the built-out porch. 'It's only just after ten; come in and have a drink and meet Isabel and Charles,' I urged the colonel. 'They want to meet you.'

'Some other time; plenty of time.' He stood for a moment

on the steps beside me. 'Er, bad luck, this posting of yours, bad luck. Good night, good night.' How did he know? I hadn't mentioned it. Not in front of Lester.

Isabel must be having a dinner-party; bursts of laughter came through the doorways as I walked across the wide veranda and paused on one threshold, looking into the lounge. About a dozen people sat about; Isabel had her back to me and Charles was sitting, deep in talk with—with Commander John Douglas! He looked up suddenly, and our eyes met. I wished then I had gone quietly through one of the side rooms and spoken to the 'boy'. It was too late, though, he said something to Charles and rose quickly. Isabel turned, too.

'Margaret! Why didn't you tell us?' She was hugging me and pulling me into the room. 'Oh, this is lovely! You've got mud on your cheek! Where on earth did you spring from? Why didn't you tell us, so we could meet you?' Mud on my cheek!

I was introduced round the room, feeling awkward and strangely shabby, amongst those other women in their gay evening dress. 'My little C.O. brought me down in his car. He only asked me this morning, so I hadn't time to tell you. I've had supper—we had a picnic on the way down,' I explained. 'I'd better go and get this mud off,' I ended, smiling.

'You must have coffee and some sandwiches,' Isabel insisted.

'We'll all have coffee and sandwiches,' Charles suggested.

'Margaret's going to turn the army inside out when she comes down here,' Isabel promised a gunner major. He looked me over reflectively.

'When are you coming down, Mrs. er—Captain?' he asked. 'The army's all right, but the R.A.F. at Worli could do with an overhaul, and there's always the Navy.'

I didn't want to tell Isabel and Charles about having to stay on in Dustypore in front of all these strangers, so I hedged.

'Oh, nothing's fixed yet,' and turned away, to find John Douglas seating himself beside me.

'When are you going *back* this time?' He stirred his coffee and didn't look at me.

'Tomorrow night. By train.'

'Care to tell me?' and I knew instinctively he meant Private Orr. I told him.

'Yes. It needs a woman,' he said slowly. 'They're quite right. I thought at first——' He checked himself. 'The men will just about bare their souls to the right kind of woman, and *if* she's the right kind, she'll know when not to feel insulted.' He smiled at me. 'You'll get on well with the Admiral, after all. He calls agricultural implements plain spades.'

'The Navy for bluntness! I'd like to have met him, but I won't, now. I've got to stay up in Dustypore. The Brigadier told me this afternoon.'

'Permanently, you mean?' and I could have sworn the news was a disappointment to him. But then a graceful bare arm came round his shoulders and Sheena Belton was there.

'Come on, you're going to dance. Felix is putting a record on.'

Felix was the gunner major. He and I followed Sheena and John out on to the large sun porch cum sea veranda at the back of the bungalow. The other guests preferred sitting down to dancing. It must have made them hot to watch the four of us whirling about outside. How pleasant it would have been to sit in that large, comfortable room with the polished marble floor, Persian rugs and satiny chintz-covered furniture in the evenings, instead of on that exposed veranda in Dustypore. Scummy water for keeps, too!

'Have you any plans—er—for tomorrow?' John Douglas asked me as we danced together.

'No! Thank goodness! I'm going to sit out here all day and just stare at the sea, if I can manage it!'

'Oh! I wondered if you'd like to have lunch at the Gymkhana? Or dinner somewhere; and then I could take you to the station?' But I turned all his kind offers down flat.

The party broke up just before midnight. 'Thank goodness.' Isabel slumped into a chair. 'I wouldn't have asked them if I'd known you were coming.'

Sheena, stacking the gramophone records in untidy heaps, told her, 'I've asked John to come in for a drink tomorrow. I hope you don't mind? He's bringing his bathing-kit. We can sun-bathe outside, if the rain keeps off.' The bungalow was built almost on the sea-shore, a tiny garden at the back, then rocks and the beach.

'Of course I don't mind. Ask him to stay for lunch, too. Good night, Sheena.' Sheena wandered off along the veranda, and Isabel sighed. 'Charles says that commander's too good for her, I shouldn't encourage it! But he'll keep her in order, if anyone can.'

'Is—is she staying with you?'

'For a few weeks, while her father's up in Delhi. Her mother died out here while she was at school in England. She came out for the summer holidays in 1939, and of course she couldn't get back again. She was sixteen then, and she's grown up out here with her father. Completely spoilt! Now she's got a job in the naval decoding office, and met this Douglas man there. He's young for a commander, Charles says, but he's

been at sea all the war. He's only been stationed here a month, anyway. We met him at the Yacht Club last Wednesday and he asked about you. I rather liked the look of him, so I told him he must come and have dinner with us. He was awfully embarrassed then, and explained he thought he *was* dining with us tonight! Sheena, of course! She'd asked me if she could bring a naval chap to dinner, and I said yes. While her father's away I want to keep as much of an eye on her men friends as I can. She seems to have fallen for him.'

'The commander isn't married, then?'

'No, of course he isn't. Even Sheena wouldn't bring him here as a boy friend if he were married already!'

'Still chattering, you two?' Charles came in. 'Now then, Margaret, out with it. What's the bad news? It's written all over you!' So I explained about staying up in Dustypore.

John Douglas came in for his drink and was persuaded without much trouble to stay on for lunch, but he didn't bring his bathing-kit. Sheena monopolized him, and I was glad she kept him talking outside on the sea veranda, while I made plasticene animals for Glenda and Nick and Meggie in the nursery. But Nick ran out to show off one of my more ambitious efforts, and the pair of them came back with him. The commander sat himself down on the floor and began opposition modelling and, after one or two hints, Sheena gave me a very nasty glare and went off. But I didn't want her commander!

'How often do they give you leave?' he asked, poking eyes in a rabbit's head with a matchstick.

'Every second week-end. Forty-eight hours.'

Marian, the children's nurse, came in then to collect them, to wash their hands and faces for lunch. The commander and I were left alone with our plasticene.

'I'd like to write to you. If you don't mind?'

'Well——' I began.

'That's settled, then. We'd better go and wash our hands, too.'

His eyes had a definite twinkle in them.

Chapter 8

'I just thought I'd pop in to tell you I met your sister when we were down in Bombay. It seems such a *pity* you don't *insist* on being posted there. A charming couple, I thought, and the colonel agreed with me. She told me . . .'

 Her voice scraped

on and on, and I listened and made polite noises of agreement, watching the little specks of foam squeeze out of the sides of her full mouth and the small occasional spark of liquid which shot out and fell on my office table when she paused to take deep breaths.

Maria Shoemantle did not like me much. She was the wife of one of the Commanding Officers, the regiment's only 'officer's lady', and she had ruled their roost blithely until I came on the scene. She still ruled it, but she couldn't seem to see that. An indefatigable worker, with every interest of her husband's men very much at heart, I admired her tremendously and tried to co-operate. But she put a spoke in my particular welfare wheel at every opportunity. For the matter of that, I was far from being *persona grata* with any of the officers' wives in Dustypore. At a first meeting with any of them, the talk always swung into a kind of routine questionnaire. 'You must have a very interesting job?' 'Oh, yes.' 'You must have to listen to some very—er—nasty things?' 'Well, yes, sometimes.' 'But aren't you ever embarrassed? I mean, just sitting listening to men telling you all about—about *that* kind of thing?' 'I was, at first. But I had to grow used to it. Like nurses have to get used to things.' Fashion, children, the war, even the weather, no topic could bring us into neutral territory; they kept their distance and left me outside the 'pale', wherever that may be. 'What have you got that I haven't got?' I asked Eleanore. 'They accept you more or less.' 'It's what you've got that I haven't,' Eleanore grinned. 'It makes a difference, in Timbuctoo as well as Dustypore. They're jealous, Margaret. They won't forgive you because they've nothing to be righteously scandalized about!' 'But they wouldn't forgive me if I got mixed up in a scandal.' 'No, but think of the pleasure they'd have, if you'd only confirm their suspicions! They consider us both thoroughly "unfrooked", if you see what I mean?' I did see.

The colonel's lady was rising to go. I got up, too, dutifully. 'You must dine with us one evening. I'll send you a card. I promised Lady Blaney I would.' Isabel's title had accomplished for me what months of slogging work in Dustypore had not earned, the accolade of a 'card for dinner'. This should tickle Eleanore! 'Now, be very firm with Private Gordon. Ridiculous, the War Office actually encouraging these men to live in sin! When the colonel told me, I was staggered, but as I said to him, and he agreed with me, the war won't be won any quicker with this sort of weak indulgence. I feel very strongly . . .' and she frothed herself out.

Private Gordon, miserably anxious about his 'wife'. 'We're not married, mam, though we've got a nipper. My wife won't divorce me; she's strict Church. We're separated and she's got a maintenance order against me. It was all right in Civvy Street. I'm a glazier and I earned enough. My wife claimed the marriage allowance, once I was in the army; about three times the maintenance, it is, too. I didn't argue with her; Connie wouldn't have got the money, anyway. But she, Connie—that's the other one, mam—she only gets what I can scrape together. I drew my P.O. savings on embarkation leave—about thirty odd pounds it was—to leave with her. That was over three years ago. They won't let you earn overtime in the army, though I'm willing.' His laugh was bitter. 'Connie lets on she's managing, tells me not to worry, but she's been moving around a lot lately—changing her digs. One of my letters came back here—she'd moved out so quick and left no address. She says she's all right, it was a mistake; but it's got me silly, worrying. If you'd just visit her, just the *once*, mam—to make sure—though I suppose your lot can't do much, things being what they are.'

'Have you got any children by your legal wife, Private Gordon?'

'No, mam. That's partly what split us; she thinks kids is messy.'

'You haven't seen the baby, by these dates you've given?'

'No, mam, not yet. It was—Connie wanted—on embarkation leave. We'd been waiting, hoping my wife would change her mind and let me free.'

'Was the separation because of Connie?'

'No, I met her afterwards.'

'Connie could get a job and leave the youngster in a day nursery. Hasn't she mentioned that at all?'

'She doesn't mention her job now. I don't *know* what's been happening to them both; I don't know *anything* out here. But what kind of a job is it? Why does she have to keep moving?'

'Didn't you and Connie have a home together?'

'Just digs. My wife has all our furniture and stuff. She kept on the house. Her mother was living with us from the start, and she's a proper wart on a corn! If I went straight home I was in the way; if I stayed out late she'd always known I was that kind. We had flaming rows over her improvements. She wanted me to have a bath every morning, and I like my baths at night, but not every night regular. Things like that—a man can't stick things like that. All baths and being teetotal! That was what finished it—the boss's son got married and I

had a drink or two, celebrating with him. Nothing much, but the canary's cage had its cloth on, in bed for the night, when I got home, and I took it off and got him started whistling again. One thing led to another, and the old lady ordered me out of the house. So I went. I went back next day, to see my wife and talk it out, but all I saw was her mother.' Gordon shrugged. 'I wrote Enid and she didn't answer. The separation was for desertion and cruelty, and I let them both get away with it, and I've paid up ever since.' I had begun to like Private Gordon with his lack of morning baths, but I couldn't be soft with him.

'If we smooth things over for you, persuade your wife to ignore her mother and come back to you, would you be willing?'

'What, after *Connie*? No, MAM. Connie's warm and—happy like. I wouldn't give up Connie. Not to get Enid and her ma back!'

'You're not worrying about your legal wife, I notice, how she's managing, with her mother to support.'

'Them? Last time I heard they were doing all right. They've got lodgers romping over my furniture—white-collar lodgers, not messy kids.' He leaned forward pleadingly. 'Just the one visit, mam? Just to be sure. . . .'

'Private Gordon, this happens to be Families' Welfare. I'm here to look after the interests of service *wives*.' Gordon flushed a dark red and reached for his bush-hat on the floor. 'But as it's pretty obvious that you won't go back to your wife, and Connie already has your baby, I can ask for a visitor to be sent, but I can't promise any help. Will that do?'

'Thanks, I——'

'Wait a minute. I'm going to tell you what to do, though I can't do it for you. Your legal wife isn't entitled to your army allowances—just the maintenance awarded by the court. I believe the War Office will take that over too, but I'm not certain. Connie and the child *are* entitled to every allowance. She could have been drawing the money all these years, if you'd had the sense to ask a few questions, instead of stupidly putting Enid down as your next-of-kin.' Even a hard-boiled welfare officer turns away sometimes from what is written in a man's grateful face. 'You'll have to swear to all these dates in front of your C.O., and he'll get the Regimental Paymaster cracking on it. . . .' I explained in detail, then added, 'There's one snag, of course, and I must warn you. Your Paymaster will, too. You will be admitting paternity of the child and afterwards——'

'I'm not admitting it, I'm *claiming* it!' Private Gordon was joyous. 'And I'll fight till I bust, for the War Office now.'

Good morale or bad morality? Where did one draw the line between good and evil? What was good and what was evil? Enid Gordon sticking to the letter of her marriage vows and breaking them in spirit was 'good'; Connie Gordon, living in sin and bearing an illegitimate child, was 'evil'. I had watched the colonel's face when he read our visitor's report.

'Connie Gordon had no army pay-book to establish her status as a soldier's wife. At her confinement she had the choice of admission as an unmarried mother or as a paying patient with no questions asked. She considers herself to be married and paid the fees asked, which wiped out the greater part of her savings. She returned to her job as waitress too soon after the birth, fell sick and was reduced to part-time work for months. Wages, 30s., rent of room, 25s. She used up the balance of her savings in these months. Resumed full-time work in factory until appendicitis sent her into hospital. When discharged from hospital she had 2½d. after paying her landlady for room rent and care of infant. Resumed full-time work in factory, but gave up job after job because her obvious ill-health led to welfare enquiries . . . did not claim unemployment pay at any time . . . obsessed by fear of enquiries and stigma of illegitimacy for her child. Reluctant to accept help. Permanent job found for her in small café run by elderly couple, who have been told her story. Will live with them on premises. Child John is well nourished, normal and properly cared for. Re-assure soldier there is now no further cause for worry. Will keep in touch personally.'

'It's hard to judge the rights and the wrongs of this,' the colonel had said quietly. But what he had meant was, it's hard *not* to judge the rights and the wrongs, because he knew about the baths and the canary. Whatever his wife might manage to worm out of him and get him to say he agreed with, this Commanding Officer and I understood each other very well. He had added, 'I'm rather glad he and Connie lived together as a married couple long enough before his call-up to qualify for the allowances.'

'Solomon must have been the first welfare officer. I wonder how often the War Office would dispute his findings nowadays.'

Eleanore and I were now part of the fabric of Dustypore life. We worked seven days a week, keeping our Sundays for the

hospital patients, and we rarely had an evening to ourselves. We refused no invitations which involved the B.O.R.s and their officers *en masse*. If he were going to the same function or party, my little C.O. always offered me a lift and, what was even better, when he lent us his car and driver, Eleanore and I could dispense with other escorts.

I had been down to Bombay for three week-ends. John Douglas had kept his promise to write, and we now exchanged friendly letters twice a week. He had met me at the station each time. I had been rather surprised the first time, but his easy-mannered explanation had been that Sir Charles was in Poona and he had offered to be his deputy.

'Have I known you long enough to call you Margaret?' he had asked gravely, shaking hands on the platform, the third week-end. 'Mrs. Michaelis is rather long-winded.' So was Commander Douglas, but I had stuck to it firmly, in spite of Isabel's 'John' this and 'John' that.

'I think so.' I had been equally grave.

It had been raining all the way down from Dustypore, and in Bombay there had been a cloudburst. Rain blanketed out the buildings over the road, as we made a dash for the car across the streaming pavement.

'It's awfully nice of you to bother to come and meet me like this,' I had told him as we sat in the back seat, he shaking his cap and I shaking my beret, 'but there really isn't any need.'

'I suppose not. But I'm here because I want to be here,' and he had turned to face me squarely. 'You don't mind, do you?' I had had to be civil and assure him I was delighted.

'That's all right, then. I wish this monsoon was over; it restricts everything. I want to take you places.'

Friendship between a man and a woman, when both are young and free, doesn't stand steady. It must either go warmly forward or coldly backward. This romantic East, with its moonlight, its lush warmth, even its bucketing rain, was a hothouse for romance, and woman scarcity could make it a forcing-house. That night, after Isabel had yawned herself out of my bedroom, I had had a good look at myself, staring into the mirror. A passable figure, though I wished it were a little more boyish, for uniform. Hair, brown, said my passport. Peter had called it imitation Titian! Scummy water shampoos were fast making it mousy. Eyes, dark blue, to quote that passport. Violet, Peter had sworn. Most of the violet had spilled over, to lie in shadows underneath. Late hours, overwork, glare—all had helped in the process. Isabel, at thirty-five, was striking-looking, though she moaned about the inches

motherhood had added in the wrong places. The loveliest woman in Dustypore, Ron had called me, but up there the newest face would always be the most attractive, until heat or work or boredom took away the freshness. In Dustypore and in Bombay everything was in my favour. John Douglas, ashore after years at sea, glimpsing the charm and serenity of my sister's home life, was telling himself it was time he settled down. He would make an ideal husband. All I would have to do was wait placidly until he was sure of himself and could feel he had given me enough time to be sure, too. If I didn't want him, now was the time to make that clear.

I had tried to make it clear to Major Ronald Dover, without much success. He had been quite right: we couldn't keep out of each other's way in that overcrowded spot, Dustypore! For the sake of appearances, I had to keep up a pretence of cheery friendliness; he was fairly senior, and to refuse him and then dance with other and junior officers would have caused instant comment. Dustypore, with little better to engage its attention, was quick off the mark. 'Still hating me like hell, Margaret?' he would mock. 'Always a sweet smile for your friends the B.O.R.s!' What they're thinking about you often would shock your innocence, though. . . .' 'Perhaps. But they're only B.O.R.s, not officers, and they wouldn't dream of telling me to my face.' 'Touche! But if I ever hear of any of them telling you . . .' I was sure none of them ever would, but I had also begun to be equally sure that this Ron would be handy, if the occasion arose. He always seemed to be handy. He seemed to shut everybody else out when he was around, and everybody else seemed to allow themselves to be shut out, which was worse. It began to worry me; I even wanted to ask Eleanore how the position looked from the outside; me never going anywhere alone with this major but always having him at my elbow, when I got there, no matter with whom I went. Did it look natural, or did it look suspicious? Or was the welfare outlook making me lose my sense of proportion?

Aunt Katrine was allowing her wishful thinking to creep into her letters. '. . . delighted you're having such a gay time. Dustypore is a most interesting place; you give me a good picture of it all in your letters. Perhaps it is all for the best, having to stay on up there. If I can believe Isabel, Bombay is dull enough—not much better than Clandon for gaiety. You mention this little C.O. rather a lot; has Isabel met him yet? Which regiment? He seems to be paying you a lot of attention. . . .' My little C.O.! That kindly, peppery, confirmed little bachelor with no intentions, and Major Dover, with

every intention! Aunt Katrine would be disappointed with both of my Dustypore swains! What would she think if I gave her a full account of the 'gay time' I had had at the gramophone recital in Ron's Mess last night?

'Gramophone recitals! Treats for us music-lovers!' Eleanore would scoff. 'We'd have to sit with our ears right against the gramophone to hear even a squeak, with all their talkey-talky.' Which was quite true.

'Fond of music, aren't you?' Ron had stated, helping me on with my cape in a corner of the Mess veranda. I had stationed myself beside the gramophone hopefully, but the bulk of the records that evening had been comic monologues for smoking concerts. Two of the Engineers had brought Eleanore and me along, and were to give us a lift home. All three stood on the steps waiting for me, laughing under a huge umbrella.

'Carry on, you three,' Ron had called out suddenly. 'I'll bring Margaret. Good night,' and then to me, 'I can borrow the old man's car.' I had tried to push past him, but he was pulling up my hood. 'Now, just wait here like a good girl, and I'll ask the old man.'

Eleanore and the Engineers had already climbed into their jeep and it was backing to turn. The nurses were being helped into their truck by a group of boisterous young officers. No solo escorts for them; Matron could be a martinet. If I just walked down the wide steps casually, as if I really were waiting, I could cross the strip of ground lighted up by the veranda and then run down the drive, and be out of the main gates before the nurses' truck passed me. There was a short cut to the hotel, under the trees and across some waste ground.

'Whoa, there,' and Ron's arm had come through mine. 'I rather hoped you'd try this. What an end to a musical evening! Walking home with you through the lovely rain!'

The truck had thundered past us, and he had shielded me from the splashed-up mud. The nurses had leaned out, laughing, to wave.

'Scandal, Margaret! All the other ladies go home quietly in their transport, but you run off in the dark and force me to pursue! I'm glad, though.' His tone had changed. 'I want to talk to you, and the old man's driver has long ears.' What a fool! I had forgotten he wouldn't be allowed to borrow the car without a uniformed driver. 'What about fastening up that dress of yours? It's trailing in the mud.'

'It doesn't matter, thank you. I can have it cleaned,' but Ron had taken no notice.

'Better use my coat-belt. Come under this tree here.' It had

been quite dry against the trunk of the huge banyan tree. And very dark. 'Here's my torch. Hold it while I get this belt off. Then I'll hold it for you.'

The belt had been far too big. 'Make a new hole, then, Margaret,' but my hands had been shaking, and after a few moments of fumbling, his hands had come over mine. 'Don't be so frightened, I'm not going to eat you. Here, you take the torch; let me do it.'

I had bunched my dress up over the tightened belt, so that the wide flounces were covered by the waterproof cape. Ron, shining his torch on my high-heeled gold slippers, had been teasing. 'You're going to be an expensive wife, dashing about the place, ruining all your whatnots! I'm not going to carry you—put any such idea right out of your mind. You're too heavy.'

'I'm glad——' I had begun furiously, but had stopped short. Ron had taken my hand and kissed it. The rain was beating like tiny drum-taps on the upper branches of the banyan, and the torch threw a disc of light on the steely down-pour, a few feet away.

'Margaret, I'll say it here. Can't we be friends?' Friends! He absolutely haunted me now, when I was trying to snub him and avoid him! If we were what he called friends, he would act as if he owned me—my constant escort, never off my doorstep, probably. An officer of Families' Welfare going around with a married man, in a place like Dustypore, where everybody thought the worst and hoped it was true!

'Please, will you try to understand? Once and for all, I don't want to be anything with you, friends or anything at all.'

'You shouldn't go around with that C.O. of yours. Not so much, anyway. I'll take you. I'll—behave.'

'I don't go around with Lt.-Col. Quinn; he rarely invites me. He just gives me lifts or lets Eleanore and me use his car. . . .'

'Bombay is rather far for just a casual lift. *Without* Eleanore, too.'

Sheer temper had made me stutter. 'It's—it's no business of y-yours! Th-this is—is—'

'This is *Dustypore*!' He had never spoken to me in quite this tone before.

'I don't care where it is! My private life is my own, and I won't allow you to——'

'*You* haven't got a private life. You're a public institution. A respected public institution. The wives will never like you, Margaret. Why go out of your way to give them ammunition? Be reasonable. Would you like it much if you knew a sweet

young widow was closeted with me in my private office almost daily, talking about sex to the manner born?' Would I like it? I would trust John Douglas, but not—certainly not Ron Dover! 'Their husbands stick up for you, but this drying a widow's tears—it's the most dangerous occupation known to man! I used to think it a good joke myself, once upon a time.'

If he kept on like this he would find himself doing it in earnest, but what on earth was he hinting at?

'I—I—they don't want me crying in their offices. Will you please tell me exactly what you're hinting at, Major Dover? And, for your information, Lt.-Col. Quinn's driver was in the car with us all the way down to Bombay.'

'His driver was only there when the car was there. That's what I'm trying to tell you. . . .'

But I had had enough standing about under trees, being bullied and dictated to. 'You've got a one-track mind, Major Dover. No one else bothers about me. Men like you take advantage because they know what I have to listen to in my office. Horrible stuff! I can't do anything about it when I'm insulted, but I *am* going home now,' and I had tried to dodge past him.

'We'll get this cleared up first. I'm not trying to insult you. I didn't mean to do it tonight, but I will now. I'm asking you to marry me.' I had felt behind me for the tree and leaned against its broad trunk, glad of the support. Aunt Katrine's ears, in far-off Clandon, Surrey, must have been ringing hard at that moment. 'A man gets to know a woman, gets to know her pretty well indeed, when she's in and out of his office, doing a job like yours, keeping everything sweet and clean and natural. Those poor devils of B.O.R.s know that you'll——'

My breath and my wits had come back to me again, and I had interrupted him very rudely. I had forgotten to be frightened so far, but I was badly frightened now. He was having another of his crazy fits, though it was marriage this time, not fifty rupees.

'My corporal says he needs a London fog to clear his head, and I think that's what you need too. Several London fogs all at once. To remind you you've already got a wife, waiting for you at home. You'll be ashamed of all this when you meet her. It's just Dustypore upsets you. . . .' Was his laughter a good sign?

'Stella, you mean? What, didn't you know? Everybody knows. At least it's no secret. We're divorced. I was a newly divorced man that night you arrived. I was trying to celebrate being a bachelor again.'

'Then I only hope your wife knows how lucky she is to be rid of you. My feet are soaking wet in these shoes. We've discussed everything now, and I want to go home.'

'She can marry her Canadian now, anyway. The sooner the better, for the sake of the children.'

'Yours?'

'No, Margaret, my angel,' and he had still been laughing. 'Hers! Two of them! At least, the second should have arrived by now, all being well. I wouldn't have overlooked one, but the Canuck couldn't be sure of that. Dashing fellows, these Canucks; minds and ways of their own.'

If the big tree had pulled up its roots and walked away in disgust, leaving us in the rain, I should have felt no real surprise. Horrible stuff! Inside and outside my office. Sweet and clean and natural!

'Didn't you—don't you *mind*? At all?'

'I did mind. A lot. Just at first.' Ron's voice had gone very quiet. 'A hell of a lot. I don't care now, though, which is all that matters. We'd only been married a few months. It was a great sensation. To be married, I mean. To be leaving someone behind. But I've been out here over four years. One forgets.' One did forget; it was quite true. One could forget most things if one really tried.

'Look, it's stopped raining. We ought to make a move.'

'Not so fast.' Ron had placed both hands against the tree and hemmed me in. 'I want your answer first. I request—permission to woo. That old-fashioned word suits you, darling.'

'Permission refused! I don't know you and I don't want to know you well enough to——' but Major Dover had no scruples about giving me time to consider. He had reached for me, had kissed me very soundly and then, still holding on to me, had whispered, 'Everything's straightforward between you and me at last. I'll keep the field clear in Dustypore, and Bombay doesn't matter, for you're not down there long enough. I won't kiss you again until you've said yes and then——' His arms had felt like iron bands round me. 'Come on, it's time you were home.' I had been able to agree on that.

The evening hadn't been over even then. Trouble hung about, waiting to pounce whenever Ron Dover was with me. He had tripped on something, stooped and muttered, 'Hang on, Margaret, this shoelace . . .' but I had walked on, hardly heeding him. My thoughts had been elsewhere, in Bombay—'which didn't matter', according to Ron's calculations. I had been thinking about Commander John Douglas.

The rain had stopped, but the ditches on either side of the road ran gurgling with water. It had been pitch dark immediately outside the dim beam of the overhead lights. I had reached the nearest and paused underneath, waiting for Ron to catch up, when two lurching figures had come out of the trees, their three-cornered capes half off their shoulders.

'S'fairy!' breathed a hoarse voice, awestruck.

'Fairy me——!' Jist dekkio them legs! I saw her fust, Ginger. Dreamin', ses you——'

'Names, regiments and camps?' Ron's voice had been harsh. They gave them, steadying each other in efforts to stand erect and at attention. 'All right. Get back to camp, the pair of you.'

'Repats. by their regiments. Celebrating, I suppose. Out of bounds after midnight, drunk and disorderly, attempting to assault a lady officer! A *welfare* officer at that, strolling about the road at midnight, with her gown all tucked up and her legs bare. They'll get a packet from the Brig. It's too serious for their own camp commander.'

'But they didn't do much—they only commented.'

'And what comments! You think they'd have passed by on the other side, do you?'

'Please, Ron, don't hurt them. •It was all your fault, anyway.'

'My fault? If I hadn't been handy . . .'

'If you hadn't been so handy I'd have been home in bed long ago.'

Ron had laughed. 'Your friends the B.O.R.s are blameless, as usual! Don't worry. If I'd wanted them arrested properly I'd have whistled up the road patrol. They'll probably run into it and be picked up, anyway. If they mention a fairy with bare legs, they'll be made to tell where they bought their drink. M.P.s are human. . . .' He had begun to whistle 'Waltzing Matilda' and broke off to say, rather boyishly, 'I can just see you in Australia, Margaret.'

'Are you going to emigrate? I mean, I'm not going with you, but are you thinking about it?'

'I *am* an Australian. I must say you haven't taken much interest in your future husband so far. Don't I look like an Australian?'

'No. And you don't even——'

'Hold it there, Margaret! I'm touchy. If you were going to point out that I speak too pansy for an Aussie—you were going to say that, weren't you?'

'No.' I had been able to be quite truthful. 'I wasn't going to say that.' Not in those words, anyway. Major Ronald Dover too pansy for an Aussie! Strangely enough, I forgave him for

everything in that moment. Australian women may have different ideas about their menfolk, but British women cherish a certain standard, set by two world wars. They expect the Aussies to be swashbuckling, rugged, ruthless, tanned, hard-bitten he-men; they expect to be swept off their feet regardless.

'I was in the old country in 1939. At London University, doing a course. I joined up in the British Army. I met and married Stella over there. She likes "Colonials", she told me once. It's Canada's turn now.' He whistled a few bars of 'Alouette'. 'She must have loved that chap. It was—a risky business.'

We had turned in through the hotel gates. 'I wish they'd billet you and Eleanore somewhere else. I watch you both on that veranda; we're all watching you. It's so—so homely, with that lamp on the table and you both sitting there, laughing; and—and you sew sometimes, don't you? We wonder what you're sewing, and often you hold things up and shake them, and we *can* see. It's like being at a play, sitting in the dark on the lawn, watching that veranda. The B.O.R.s stand at the railings, often.'

'Eleanore and I have nowhere else to sit. Her room is hopeless.'

'I'll be at the Brains Trust tomorrow night, to hear you both. Is the padre going to vet the questions first?'

We were at the steps and he unlocked the padlock.

'No, he isn't—at least, I don't think it has occurred to him to do it, and we don't like to suggest it.'

'You'll hold different views on your friends by this time tomorrow night, then, if they run true to form.' He had glanced at the other three verandas, but they were all dark. 'Margaret, it's a man's love I'm offering *you*. Stella had—a boy's. Good night.'

Toc H in Dustypore was run by a padre who had retained the full bloom of his beliefs, in spite of, or because of, six years' constant contact with British troops. I spent every Wednesday evening there, at the service of the illiterate ones. There were about twenty usually, but the numbers waxed and waned with repatriation and postings. I had taken over the writing of their home mail—my illiterate class could dictate to me items which they would have hesitated to mention to any padre. They were simple chaps, these illiterates, sometimes almost primitive, but their welfare officer kept her face straight and her manner serene, and there was never any unpleasantness.

It had been the padre's ambition to inaugurate Brains Trusts,

but there had been a lamentable lack of volunteers for the platform seats. Only heroes and half-wits would sit up there in a blaze of publicity to have their ignorance of obscure subjects exposed. Eleanore and I, after weeks of vigorous protests, had been at last enrolled for this 'beneficial service to the community', to quote the padre. A major of the R.A.M.C. who thought the padre was asking him if he approved of Brains Trusts and had said yes heartily was enrolled on the spot. The fourth member, a sergeant on Sub-Area staff, had been unofficially 'detailed', with an official assurance that he need not open his mouth if he thought it would be better employed kept closed. But, once enrolled, the sergeant took his duties seriously. He reeked of disinfectant for days beforehand, and it was understood by the knowledgeable that he was gargling steadily, in hopeful anticipation of being allowed to read out the questions. When the B.O.R. who had muttered audibly, 'In Spa-hain it ra-hains on the pla-hains,' as the sergeant passed by, was immediately put on a charge for 'unpolished boot tongues', Dustypore felt that this sergeant would do more than hold his own tongue on any Brains Trust platform.

The Commandos were coming *en bloc* from their lakeside camp eleven miles away; the W.A.C.(I) were to march in immediately after the Brigadier and his party, and the great man had stated that he had no objection to wolf-whistlers, if they would allow him to be seated first. The Indian cinema manager provided the final touch of farce, in his desire to co-operate. The large board he nailed up outside told all interested that 'On the evening of the brain trust this premise would be closed up for the depurification of all matter arising'. 'I'll never call it spring-cleaning again,' Eleanore promised me.

'I wish the padre would just let the chaps stand up and ask their questions.'

'So do I, but he says we'll get far better questions if the men feel they are anonymous.'

'And how right he's going to be! We're for it, Margo.'

The canteen dance-hall was packed full an hour before the advertised time of starting, but the R.E.s and the Signallers had rigged up loud-speakers outside, and the B.O.R.s spread their capes on the sodden ground and squatted. The Military Police band played on the canteen veranda, to lead the community singing. The little wild donkeys, long accustomed to collecting their suppers from the canteen waste-bins, galloped madly round the outside fringe of the huge circle, trying to break through. It was almost six o'clock and nearing sunset as Eleanore and I walked up the narrow path kept cleared for

celebrities and performers, to roars of wild cheering and singing.

'The Cup Final at Wembley,' remarked Eleanore, waving to her fans. 'We ought to come running out of the hall, instead of walking in.'

'We may have to do that before this evening's over,' I reminded her, also waving lavishly.

We opened with prayers and the National Anthem. The padre said the usual things, and then we were off. While he shook up the outsize tin bath with the folded slips of paper, I caught the eye of Private Burgess, sitting with six mates astride the piano. All seven had been in to consult me that morning. The home mail had been handed out after breakfast, and Burgess and fifteen others had presented themselves at my door within the hour. All had produced identical cuttings from a home newspaper, the *Daily Mirror*. The cuttings gave details of speedier repatriation, and according to the group numbers quoted, each of these men must be skulking in India, desperately evading the boat home. The sixteen wives had told them so, and though the phrasing differed in parts, it all boiled down to the same thing, 'Who is this other woman out there?'

'This 'ere is deffaymayshun,' said Burgess, their elected spokesman, indignant. 'We kin claim severe damidges.'

'If any of you could read, you'd see that this newspaper is only quoting an official War Office announcement. The defamation suit must be taken out against the War Office, and you needn't hope they'll sack you on the spot for doing it. Now, do you want Legal Aid to summons the War Office, or do you want me to send visitors round to your wives to smooth things over for you?' They had compromised on the second suggestion.

The sergeant, at a nod from the padre, closed his eyes, fumbled for a slip, opened it with trembling fingers and read it out.

'Why do women talk so much?' That was easy. Eleanore took it.

'To answer silly questions from men.' Pandemonium. The Brains Trust decided to let it rest at that.

The sergeant fumbled once more. 'Does the Brains Trust consider that Indian vegetable seeds could be grown successfully at home?' The sergeant said no flatly, and gave his reasons. The major said yes, and gave even flatter reasons. Eleanore applied common sense to an *impasse*. Why not take packets of seeds home and have a shot as a sporting proposition? The padre recommended the feminine solution, and

assured the questioner that with his packets of seeds he would also take home the united good wishes of the Brains Trust.

More fumbling. 'The R.A.F. favoured moustaches like handle-bars. What, in the opinion of the Brains Trust, would happen if an absent-minded rigger tried to start up the pilot's moustache instead of the propeller?' The B.T. advised the questioner to try his absent-minded stunt on the first moustachioed R.S.M. he encountered. His question would be answered on the spot, and much more fully than the team could hope to do.

'Why does a woman shut her eyes when she is being kissed?' I took this one. 'Probably a throwback to the days when women swooned at such an experience. Or perhaps she closes her eyes because, though she likes the face at the other end of the kiss well enough, she can't help wishing it were a little more handsome. If her eyes are closed, she can imagine it's Clark Gable or Errol Flynn.' The audience clamoured to be told if welfare shut its own eyes. Ron Dover, in the third row, shut his eyes at me and nodded. The B.T. passed on to the next question.

'Did the Brains Trust agree that a course of Yogi was indispensable to the British Army? B.O.R.s would be enabled to relax almost as comfortably on their army bunks as on their practice beds of nails.' The team were unanimous, they thought it an excellent idea. They would carry it even further. As beds of nails would work out cheaper and be more durable, why bother with army bunks?

'The last issue of fish rotted away the concrete floor of every cookhouse before it was buried. Did the B.T. agree the next issue should be used to sabotage the Japs?' The Brains Trust put it on record that G.H.Q.(I) had issued the fish in all good faith, on the sound theory that British stomachs were more resistant than concrete slabs. They thought it would be useless as an offensive weapon against the Japs, because if it rotted concrete cookhouse floors in three days, what would happen to the ship or plane used to transport it?

Eleanore and I exchanged glad smiles across the platform. There were to be no stinkers, after all. The padre's faith was justified.

'If women really dressed to please men, why, in the opinion of the B.T., did they bother to buy clothes or, alternatively, so many clothes?' The team were in disagreement from the start about this. The major gave facts and figures to prove that he was never pleased at being so much out of pocket. The sergeant said he was boss in his own house, which seemed to

be begging the point. Eleanore asked the whole audience to go with her to Ascot for a moment, to study lacy gowns and fluttering ribbons and cartwheel hats; to consider standing in the moonlight beside a woman gowned in shimmering satin. She was going to lead them on to the beach at Nice, and they would have gone with her, breathless students, only the loud sighing noises which drifted in through the open windows drowned her voice. The lonely men of Dustypore could only stand so much and no more. The team, in agreement at last, considered that women could safely be left to dress suitably for every occasion.

'Why do our wives encourage the 'Yanks and what, in the opinion of the Brains Trust, have they got that we haven't, besides too much money?' The sergeant's voice faltered as he read. He sat down in a silence which could be felt. So far the questions had been slapstick, vulgar, entertaining and amusing, with very few serious points raised. The Brig. had clapped his hands and guffawed with the rest, relaxing more perceptibly as the fun proceeded. Now he seemed to have tightened himself up again, into a coiled spring. The other C.O.s in the front row sat with stony faces. It dawned on me, then, why the Brig. was here tonight, with such a formidable array of power. Not because women on the platform were a sure 'draw' to him, or because he had nowhere else to go, but because there *were* women on the platform, and there might be unpleasant incidents, which his presence would nip in the bud.

The padre was on his feet, white with anger. 'I apologize on your behalf to our lady guests. I had hoped . . .' Surely this rollicking evening need not end on such an unpleasant, rebuking note? The padre was making a mistake: he should just have said quietly, 'Next question, Sergeant,' and let it pass. The team could not discuss a question like this, not in a place like Dustypore. Could I? . . . Hide of an elephant . . . heart of a lion . . . cunning . . .

'May I, please, padre? I can take this one.'

He broke off, hesitated, felt behind him for the arms of his chair and sat down. The hall and the outer audience waited, silent still and impassive.

'Gentlemen, you all know what my job is.' I had to stop because it's all very well to say you'll answer a question, but you have to have some breath with which to do it. The Brigadier's eyes were giving me a direct order. 'Finish what you've begun, now you've begun it. . . .'

I tried again. 'This question gives me a chance to say in public what I've been saying to quite a few of you in my

office. I can't answer this question properly—nobody can—but I can say something about your wives.' Thank God, women don't have Adam's apples, coping with one would have licked me. 'The women—wives you've left behind—fall into three kinds of groups. The great majority are in the first kind of group. They have kept the homes going, brought up the children, contended with rationing, shortages, bombing and evacuation and made little fuss about it all. They are looking forward eagerly to your homecoming, and they certainly never dream that you privately suspect them of chasing members of the American Army. You'll go back home and settle down and take them for granted. Well, you're lucky chaps. Would you like a little advice? How often do you tell your wife you love her? Do you remember her birthday? Or your wedding anniversary? We're pathetic creatures; we're actually grateful to you if you casually remember what you ought never to allow yourselves to forget——' I had to stop because they were cheering. I licked my lips and swallowed hard as many times as I could, while I still had the chance. 'Now, the second group, it's a tiny minority. The wives in it misbehave even in peacetime, so the war only gives them more and better opportunities. The third, the last group, isn't so very large either, though it seems so to men serving out here. These wives would have been all right in peacetime, but wartime conditions at home have unsettled them. Often the real reason why they're grabbing at what they think is a good time has been the drab sameness of their married lives with you pre-war. They secretly resented being neglected generally and taken for granted. When they found themselves in contact with other men who admired them and made a fuss of them, it was like a tonic, a youth restorative. Because that's what the Yanks have got that you haven't—the gift of making a very ordinary woman feel like a queen and treating her like one, too. . . .' I had to stop again, but it wasn't cheering this time. It was an ominous growl, with quite a few loud shouts and boos. My little C.O.'s face seemed very white, sitting there in the front row. I almost wanted to smile at him. To reassure him. But I only paused for a few moments and a good swallow, and when the general audience, inside and outside, found they weren't hearing something which might be good value, they sh-sh-ed the opposition for me effectively. '... physical infidelity is only one way of breaking marriage vows, though it's the one which seems to matter most to you men, if your wives are doing it, not yourselves. I'm not excusing this third group, far from it. Marriage vows are made to be kept to the

letter in every single particular, for men and women. But some husbands are too self-righteous by far, and you're all selfish. Even Betty Grable or our illusive Hedy, in a jumper and skirt and rubber apron, hair untidy and face all steamy and flushed, washing nappies in the kitchen sink and shouting to Johnny and Mary to stop their row, might feel like giving you a piece of their minds if you were sitting with your feet up, reading the newspaper. They wouldn't wind lily-white arms round your necks either. These wives in the third group deserve a little pity as well as a lot of blame, and they also deserve a second chance, if they are good mothers to your children.' I let them roar their heads off and gazed round the hall; for effect, really, because I was too shaky to focus properly. But I did notice that the Brig. had relaxed again in his seat, and he couldn't have paid me a greater compliment. 'Now for the Yanks. They're not the only men hanging around at home, on the off-chance. There are still quite a few British civilians and British soldiers and sailors and airmen, as well as the fighting men of our other Allies. Men are always inclined to take their pleasures where they find them. The Yanks are only reacting as all soldiers react when they find themselves amongst a foreign population, thousands of miles from home. The British Army react that way in India only too often. Some of you here, in this very hall—to go no further for examples. I've often wondered, listening to some of you in my office, what the French soldiers thought about the 'Mademoiselle from Armentières' touch in the last war. I'm afraid I always talk too much, and I've taken up far too much of the Brains Trust's time for my own private spout. But if the B.O.R. who wrote out this question is really in trouble, I hope he will come and see me in my office tomorrow. If one of you did it for a joke, I hope he feels he has got his money's worth. I'd like to have him in my office for a few minutes, too.'

The sergeant, a sensible chap, read over the rest of the questions to himself before reading them out publicly, but there were no more 'sticky' ones.

'Whew!' Eleanore sat down on my veranda and fanned herself with her beret. 'Nevaire no mo'ah, nevaire no mo'ah! Two hours of it, and a good thing for you and me, Margo, there were no Judy tabs present. Not a single one turned up to watch two welfare officers bandying vulgar topics on a public platform. It was no use sitting up there trying to act shocked. That one about our gallant allies! You'll end up editing queries in a heart-to-heart column! I'm glad you didn't let it pass, Margo, joking aside.'

'It's over now, and we needn't do it again. The padre will have plenty of volunteers for his platform next time. That sergeant was terrific! I'm going to write home mail tonight. Are you coming over here to sit after dinner?'

'No, you're not and no, I'm not! I haven't broken it to you yet. The Commandos are fixing a celebration tonight. All on the spur of the moment. You were talking to the Brig. Laurel said we're to be the special guests of their old man. He's sending his jeep for us at nine.' Laurel was the Commando adjutant and the 'special guests' bit was equivalent to a royal command. Eleven miles in a jeep over a road washed into potholes by the rains. And then eleven miles back again around midnight! After two hours' Brains Trusting!

'Where on earth was your headache face?' I demanded wrathfully.

'I put it on at once, but Laurel is short-sighted. I said I thought you were dining with the Brig. and he replied that you couldn't be—the "old boy" is dining with their "old man" out at camp. These Commandos keep a big basin of hard-boiled eggs on a side table in their Mess, so I'm going to skip dinner here. Ron had to go before you came over but he said to tell you he'll be late for the party but he'll bring us home.'

The squirrel wheel of Dustypore!

Chapter 9

Eleanore and I were sitting in the front row at an ENSA show when the Japs surrendered. At least, that was where we were when the news hit Dustypore. This was the sixth and last performance, and we had already sat through the other five performances, in front rows, at five other camps, on five consecutive evenings. Welfare had either to boycott ENSA altogether or be honoured guests at every ENSA show in every camp in Dustypore. All or nothing! After each show we were introduced to the artistes at the Mess party. We had become a stock joke for the comedians. After a few nights we would find ourselves mentioned in the 'patter'. 'He had heard there was a shortage of skirt material (or lady shortage or shortage of little bits of fluff, it all depended on the comedian concerned) in Dustypore, but he was being chased round the place by two strapping wenches (or lovely drops of nonsense, etc.).' It always went down well with the B.O.R.s.

The comedian was singing on the stage, something about

'Did you see what I saw?' and the troops shouted 'No' regretfully at intervals. And then the leading lady ran on to the stage and clasped the comedian in her arms. This item had not been included in the other performances, and the piano and fiddle stopped dead. The leading lady thrust the comedian aside and flung out her arms. 'THE JAPS HAVE SURRENDERED! THE WAR IS OVER!' The rest of the cast poured on to the stage and danced round in a ring. Behind us, pandemonium broke loose as the news sank in.

Eleanore, beside me, gave a half-sob and slumped forward. I pushed her gently back in the chair and found Maria Shoemantle was beside me.

'She's fainted. Her fiancé is—*was*—a Jap prisoner-of-war.'

Maria took charge. Within seconds the hall was cleared of the troops; they went quickly and quietly when they heard about Eleanore. Maria, the M.O. and I were the only people in the place when she came round. She tried to smile.

'I'm sorry to be such a fool, but I'd been hoping . . . and when they joked about it, I—I——'

'It's quite true, Eleanore. The war *is* over.'

'You're sure?' She was on her feet at once. 'Oh——'

Eleanore Tarling went along the row of chairs and kicked each one backwards but, at the last but one, she fell on her knees beside it.

'Come along,' said Maria to the M.O., and took me by the arm. 'She'll join us when she's ready.'

Chapter 10

Morning

Eleanore was annoyed when she came in to breakfast.

'That *dhobi*!'

'Where's he taken it this time?' I grinned. I was able to grin. My washing had just been delivered at my front door.

'The Engineers! And I found him sitting on my top step, waiting to break the news. Never occurred to that chump to dash off and retrieve it and keep it all a secret from me. I'd rather not know. What he wanted to find out was, did I really need any of it urgently, by tomorrow! I almost grabbed his bike, to dash off and collect the lot myself. Why doesn't he learn to ride that bike, anyway? he pushes it about the place like a wheelbarrow! INDIA!'

'Not India, just Dustypore,' I corrected her. 'Never mind,

the R.E.s had mine a week or two ago, so it won't be the shock to them it was to the gunners.'

Eleanore was eyeing the large damp patches on my uniform. 'Sparrow Hall, Sparrow White or Sparrow Smith?'

'Oh, the whole lot of them,' I told her wearily. 'Nick used his pocket-money to buy bird-seed last time I was down there. It was Commander John Douglas's bright idea in the first place. I had to promise faithfully to feed my flock with it. They're not used to a rich diet. Yet, anyway.'

'I'll give them both a special report, Margo.' She buttered her toast and added, 'I like your commander. In fact, if I weren't tied up with Jeff I'd look twice at him.'

'It's his uniform. After so much khaki drab. And he's not my commander.' I wished I hadn't added that as soon as I'd said it. I should have played up and kept it at joke level.

'Oh, yes, he is. Very much so. That week-end I was down there I showed them that snap of you with Tip and Run. Nick demanded the piece with Tip on it and Glenda wanted the corner with Run. So I cut it up and threw your face in the waste-paper basket. It didn't stay there, but Isabel and I didn't wonder where it had gone!'

I changed the subject. 'Give them all my love. And mention that I carry the welfare flag alone this evening. To all three functions.'

Eleanore was going down to Bombay on the morning train. Her C.O. was staying there for a few days and the question of Eleanore's transfer was to be discussed. It was over a fortnight since Japan's surrender, but there had been no news of Jeff. She had everything roughly planned out, however. Wherever Jeff was sent, one of our welfare detachments was sure to be stationed there or fairly near. She would ask to be transferred; they would get married and go home together in the spring.

Social functions often clashed in Dustypore. It could hardly be otherwise, with every camp and depot desperately keen to seize on the least excuse for a festivity to break the monotony. This evening there were to be three: a cocktail party at an Officers' Mess, which would be extended into an informal dance if sufficient feminine support turned up; a Sergeants' Mess was holding a Guests' Night and the B.O.R.s were having their usual monthly dance. The sergeants also promised a band, but there again dancing would depend on the feminine element. Eleanore and I had accepted for all three; to refuse all three would have been selfish, to accept any one in preference to the others would have been unpardonable.

'Ron doing your transporting tonight?' We were lingering in the driveway after breakfast.

'No. He wanted to, but I was firm. . . .' It came out in a rush then, the question which puzzled me. 'Eleanore, how do you manage to keep them all friendly, without letting—any particular one monopolize you?'

'Simple as ABC. When one got too friendly, I told him straight out there was someone else, and said it as if I meant it. Which I did, of course. I didn't give details, either.'

'But I can't say that. He wouldn't believe me.'

'Ron Dover? He'd believe you, all right.'

'But it wouldn't be true, and he'd insist on being told who it was. He'd want all the details.'

'Tell him, then. You're a knock-out at fixing things for the B.O.R.s. I hold my thumbs for you sometimes, but you can't seem to make a mistake handling their affairs. A fine mess you're making of your own,' but her look took the sting out of the words.

'There's absolutely nothing to tell. If it's John Douglas you mean? I haven't known him long enough.'

'I've only met him once, and that was enough—they're both waiting for a little encouragement. Even Ron, for all his bold front, isn't sure how you really feel about marrying again. John Douglas and Ron Dover are grown-up men who know what they want, but you—you're only an infant . . .' and Eleanore gave me a hug and a kiss.

I walked to the office. I hadn't been adult enough to understand Peter Michaelis either.

Just outside the hotel back entrance the *dhobi's* bicycle lay in the dust at the roadside; he squatted comfortably in the ditch, smoking a *biddy* (Indian brown-papered cigarette). His eyes closed tactfully when he saw me. It would be useless to argue with him, on Eleanore's behalf, so I hurried past.

The P.T. squads went by at a steady trot, on their way back to camp. The front files, close behind authority, grinned broadly; the middle files, safer in anonymity, wolf-whistled shrilly; the rear ranks, panting harder than the rest, could only manage winks between gasps. The Italian prisoners-of-war brought up the rear of the early morning exercisers. They sauntered, chattering and laughing. One B.O.R. marched stolidly in front of them to lead the way, another B.O.R. marched at the back, to make sure they followed. The Italians always saluted me gallantly, calling out what they obviously considered to be normal words of English greeting. They had learned 'robust' English from my friends the B.O.R.s. The

rear-guard usually wore a red face and a scandalized expression as he swung past me.

A client was waiting on the office veranda.

'Mornin', mam.' A big man with a big beam. 'It's tomorrow I'm off. I wondered would you want me to take anything home for you?' He was going home on compassionate home posting. For years his wife had withheld the news that little Peg, their daughter, aged five, had had infantile paralysis. Private Jay had somehow sensed that there was something wrong and, rather diffidently, had consulted me. 'Peg's five, so she must be at school, though Min hasn't said if it's the one across the common from us. There's two other chaps in the *basha* got kids that age, and they get little bits about rats and cats on mats and little pictures with houses and smoke supposed to be coming out of the chimneys. Nice bits of things to sit about and look at. But Min don't make Peg do anything like that, for me. And I want a photo, too. I keep on asking and asking but Min never lets on. I haven't set eyes on either of them since 1942—that was my last leave before embarkation.'

'Haven't you got a photo at all, then?'

'Oh yes,' and a big hand had reached into the left breast pocket. Just a snap, so faded and worn it could have been almost anything. 'Peg had curls then, and that's Min, laughing. I'm not in it, I took it. Brownie camera, it was.'

'All right, Jay, our visitor will go and have a chat with your wife and see that you get another photo at least. Camera films aren't easy to get at home nowadays, and she may not have wanted to spend the money being taken properly in a studio. Perhaps your Peg will manage a little house with chimneys, too.'

But Peg had never been to school and could not write her Dad even one word, not even a stroke. She had lain on her back for months, and now she was just beginning to wear leg-irons. 'What need was there to worry Frank? He's fighting and he'd got enough to bear,' but Min had been glad enough to talk it over with the visitor.

I smiled at Private Jay this morning. 'No, I haven't anything to send home. Nice of you to ask, though. Did you get some of those little chocolate dolls in the bazaar? Be careful how you pack them.'

'I got six, and the chap put them in a special box. I can just see Peg's face when I hand them over. I got a proper doll, too, all trimmed up and real hair. And scent for Min.' We shook hands, and I went into the office. Peg's pale little face would glow when she saw her daddy. Struggling to run to his arms,

in her clumsy leg-irons. Min's face, too. There were so many like her at home, doing their best, alone.

I was dusting the office when the corporal hurried in with the two signals. 'Signals says one of them is urgent. I was to give it to you at once. That'll be the one about their chap, mam. They want a receipt, too. Fussy all at once.'

The urgent signal was brief. 'MRS ANDERSON DEAD STOP SIGNAL LEAVE DECISION.'

Signalman Anderson's mother had been dying of cancer. 'Likely to be prolonged and lingering,' the medical certificate had said, and his request for compassionate posting or leave had been refused. He had only been overseas a year, and other B.O.R.s with longer service records had had home troubles, too. His brother in the R.A.F. was stationed at home, and he would be given leave to attend to the last sad rites when the moment finally came. But Families' Welfare stressed the point that Mrs. Anderson had not been a known cancer victim when she had said good-bye to her youngest son, she might not linger on until he was repatriated normally, and her other two sons had been killed. After months of correspondence, Anderson had been given his month's compassionate leave, to say good-bye to his dying mother.

'You're overdoing this sentiment stuff, you know,' the Staff captain had told me, coldly.

'You mean *you* are,' I had retorted, just as coldly. 'It was you who wrote that footnote for me about——'

'Never argue with a woman, and keep welfare officers at a distance, several miles' distance, for preference. The chap's going home, so be satisfied. . . .' The footnote had stated: 'Cases such as this are watched with anxiety by all ranks. Compassionate leave restores morale.' So it did, out of all proportion to the actual leaves granted.

Anderson was due to leave Dustypore the next morning. There was no longer any valid reason for him to go home and there was time to cancel his air-lift. I might have been tempted to mislay the signal for a few hours, long enough for him to be on his way; his mother's sudden death would be shock enough, without the disappointment of cancelled home leave as well. But his unit held the signal records, and had even asked for a special time receipt.

O.C. Signals was not a devotee of welfare. He might have been, but I had offended him in my early days in Dustypore. He was a bachelor, aching to be enrolled under the banner of the gay of that breed. Harmless enough, but I had not known that. When, at our first interview, he had gallantly placed an

arm round my waist I had snubbed him thoroughly, instead of being firmly tactful. Commanding Officers were not partial to snubs, from me or anyone else, and relations between Signals and Families' Welfare had remained strained. The signalling band were small and their home troubles minor, so it had not really mattered. Now, today, if I handled him properly, I had a second chance to bring O.C. Signals into the welfare fold.

I read the other sign

'PRIVATE BALL WIFE ATTEMPTED SUICIDE RECEIPT LETTER REQUESTING DIVORCE STOP OTHER WOMAN INDIA STOP RECONCILIATION ESSENTIAL EVERY MEANS POSSIBLE STOP REPEAT EVERY POSSIBLE MEANS.'

I laid this aside—I had to concentrate on O.C. Signals first. I nibbled the end of my pencil and gave the matter very careful thought.

'Here's the mail, mam.' The corporal bustled in once more, to stack the pile of letters at my elbow.

'Thanks,' I said absently, still thinking hard. The corporal had long fancied himself in the role of guardian angel to my person. He surveyed me now, doubtfully, and then brightened.

'The pail of char has just come round, this very minute, so it's warm. I'll fetch you a basinful, mam. Nothing like a cuppa char to keep body and soul fighting fit,' and his cheery whistling of 'Bless 'em all' came back through the net curtains.

Fighting fit! One sip of the stuff cleared my head of all indecision. I poured the rest of it down the drain in the small back room.

'Any spare transport?' The transport sergeant was doubtful.

'But I can get you a jeep in about half an hour, mam, if you'll hang on.'

'I want it this very minute. Don't bother, I'll jump a truck.'

'I'll send the jeep to fetch you back, mam.'

'Can I have it until lunchtime? I'll be at Signals H.Q. First, anyway.'

O.C. Signals kept me waiting fifteen minutes, but I didn't mind. I sat on the bench on the outside veranda, and one of the signalmen brought me an enamel mug of char and a dog biscuit. He carefully wiped the drips off the bottom of the mug on his bare knee, but the biscuit didn't need any wiping.

'We ain't got cups nor plates,' he apologized.

'I'm used to mugs,' I reassured him, and took a sip from this one, as proof. He lingered. Perhaps if I smacked my lips over it he would feel reassured enough to depart?

'Canteen dance tonight, mam.' No need for lip-smacking. I knew the drill at once.

'Are you going? I shall expect you to ask me to dance.'

'You bet, mam! It's—it's a *date*!' He grinned and went off, whistling 'I'll walk beside you'. I hoped I would remember his face again tonight. In this almost womanless world of keen dancers, I was a godsend. I should still have been a godsend if I had had buck teeth and a waddle.

The bench was at the very end of the veranda and a bougainvillea grew handily just around the corner. There was no one in sight, so I hurriedly tipped the chair over the thirsty-looking roots. It must have been a stray breeze which set the leaves rustling in protest as the liquid drained sullenly through the earth. But I still had the dog biscuit; I couldn't bury that so easily.

A very civil 'Good morning, this is a pleasure,' startled me into strangled choking. The biscuit and I were at odds. When O.C. Signals had patted my back sufficiently and lent me his hanky to wipe my eyes, he was in a rattling good humour.

'I'm s-sorry—'

'What of it? What of it?' he soothed, and manhandled me into his office. 'I'll just get you a cup of tea. That should put you right. I know all ladies like tea.' He smiled. 'BROWN!'

'Yessir?' Brown's head came through a wooden hatch affair in the wall.

'Bring some tea for the captain.'

'Yessir. A—er—mug, sir? Or your cup, sir?'

'What? Oh. Oh, my cup, of course. I'll have the mug,' and he lifted the cup off its cardboard mat on his table and passed it through to Brown.

'Now, what can I have the pleasure of doing for you, madam? You don't often honour us like this.'

I passed the signal over the table. 'Have you seen this? It's about Anderson. He goes on leave tomorrow and his mother is dead.'

'I've seen it; I told them to send it round to you at once. He went out to Repat. "M" Camp yesterday. You'll tell him, of course?'

'No. I've brought it back to you officially, with my comments. You're the best person to cope with it,' I supplemented tactfully.

'You mean, I've got to have him in here and read out all this rigmarole to him?'

'Not my comments, just the actual report. In this case, that means the signal.'

'What happens if he takes it badly? What am I supposed to do with him? I can't comfort him. It's the lad's mother, you know, dash it all. A bit thick, all this.' It was now my job to comfort and stiffen the C.O. concerned. I did so.

'... and though some of the other C.O.s shirk it and get me to do it, I know *you* would rather tackle the job yourself.'

'Yes. H'm. Yes. Well. I'll have him in, of course. Do my best with him, naturally.'

Brown and the tea put a stop to further ruminations.

The Signals unit had risen to the occasion, gallant in the manner of their Commanding Officer. Brown proudly bore in a tray, cups and saucers, one teaspoon, a milk-jug, a sugar-basin, a teapot and a slop-basin. His C.O. sat, dumbfounded, as I busied myself over the teacups. He only pulled himself together to utter 'Both' when I asked him, 'Do you take sugar? And cream?' Cream was rather an exaggeration, but the greasy buffalo milk was certainly thick. Brown hovered at my elbow and carried the cup round the table to his C.O. before he smiled himself out.

'This is very nice, very nice indeed. I had no idea we owned a teaset,' remarked O.C. Signals, gratified at such a display.

'You don't!' I corrected him. 'That's the Brig.'s own teapot, for one thing. The only one within reasonable scouting distance. I can't place that slop-basin, though. There's never been a slop-basin anywhere before.' The C.O. looked at the slop-basin more closely. Then lifted it up. It had a garland of violets round the rim.

'This *is* mine,' he exclaimed. 'I put my teeth in it every——' and had the grace to stop there. Royalty and welfare officers have one small thing in common: they know when not to laugh. I stayed severely practical.

'You shouldn't live over the shop,' I pointed out. 'Brown has rinsed it out thoroughly, I'm sure. Not that it matters, for the tea-dregs. Now about Anderson. That last bit in the signal. Did you realize he isn't entitled to any compassionate leave now?'

That took his attention off his basin. The whole situation had to be explained to him at great length. '... and it would have saved a lot of bother if I could have mislaid that signal.'

'Mislay it now. I've seen all I want to see of the damned thing.'

'But I can't! Not now! You made me sign for it. I hate these time receipts; they always complicate matters. I don't know why you have to make things more difficult for me.'

'Let me get this quite clear, madam.' Very formal, and my

heart sank. 'You mean, I'm to have this lad of mine in here, tell him first his mother is dead and then tell him to report back for duty, as his leave has been cancelled?' I nodded. 'Like hell I will! You've made a nice mess of this, I must say. Leaving the thing in the air for months, until it's too late.'

'I've got ten visitors' reports, four medical certificates and twenty-one letters I wrote myself, in Anderson's file. You've got copies of them all, too, in your own file, or you should have. And I went to the Brig. personally. *I've* done my job. I'd have mislaid that signal and risked any row which might blow up afterwards. But my H.Q. knows that their message will arrive in time for action. They say so. They don't delay anything, ever, and the War Office knows it can trust them to be honest. If Anderson goes home now, they'll assume that a B.O.R. can get home, even after the relative concerned has died. They'll fight other cases on that assumption, quoting this one. What do I say then? Tell them I paid no attention to a signal which *your* records prove I signed for, in time?'

O.C. Signals was pacing up and down behind his table. He probably had not even noticed it, but the tapping machines behind that hatch in the wall had fallen suddenly silent.

'All right, then. You've done your part. You can show a clean record.' Which wasn't what I was bothering about at all. I wanted to know what this man would decide to do off his own bat. It was important to Families' Welfare or, rather, me, to know if he would take a risk for his men when the need arose. The interview was clearly over, but I still sat.

'Major Kay, I've no right to question any Commanding Officer, but will you—could you tell me, now, what you're going to do? I must know. Please? . . .'

He was surprised. 'It is decided, isn't it? I do nothing, nothing at all. The lad goes home. If there's any rap—well, you did your best to explain to me and I—misunderstood and took no action.' The machines behind the hatch sprang back into tapping life. I relaxed myself.

'I'm an ass; I've just remembered you could ask the Brigadier. He's the proper person to decide. In fact, I needn't have bothered you at all, really.'

'Oh?' He sat down in his chair, visibly relieved, yet strangely reluctant, at the same time. 'He's a bit of a stickler, though. He might decide to keep within regulations.'

'Not him. He——' I began and stopped. What was it the Brig. had said last time? Something about 'Don't hesitate to come and ask me, any time. My shoulders are broad enough, I think. . . .'

'He's a just man,' I finished up.

'Where's that signal? I'll go along there now.' Sub-Area was just around the corner. 'Hadn't you better be handy? He might want to consult you.'

'Better take your file with you. He'll glance through it, look at the signal, then say yes or no. I don't come into it.'

'There's more to this welfare racket than I thought.' O.C. Signals gave me a hand up into the waiting jeep. 'I'll send a note round to let you know how things work out.'

'An official letter in triplicate, please,' I laughed. 'Then I'll signal London. Why not have lunch with me at the hotel? I'll be back there about 1.30. My "boy" will park you on my veranda if I'm not there.'

'Thanks, I think I will. Expect me on your veranda, at 1.30.'

The jeep driver made a queer noise in his throat as he started up the engine. I waved to Major Kay and his signalmen's faces, framed in the window behind him. At last, cordial relations had been established between the Royal Corps of Signals and Families' Welfare.

This driver, a gunner, went in for tricky wheelwork. We cleared the gate of Signals' H.Q. in two wild swoops, the first designed to scrape past one gate-post without actually grazing the wood, the second designed to make the sentry jump smartly aside. But he slowed to let three little donkeys gambol across the road.

'Affectionate animals,' he commented. 'I'm in the trade meself, me an' me ole man.'

'Oh?'

'Yup! Not much cop, with kids these days. 'Cept fer the very littlest 'uns. An' their Ma's. They fancy a ride. Crool fat too, most times, them Ma's. Takes a good shove off to get 'em goin'.'

The unit whose camp we were now headed for was the toughest in all Dustypore. I hoped they came no tougher in the whole British Army. Their officers boasted that Plassey was on their battle honours. A two-hundred-year-old thirst accounted for some of their little habits, of course. They drilled like Guards, trained like Commandos, swore like gunners, fought like Highlanders and drank like fishes. The regimental creed, if creed it could be called, was simple: 'the woman must be willing'. They held to it, drunk or sober, faithfully, because they feared only two men, their colonel and their regimental sergeant-major, both gentlemen in their respective ways. The unit had been in Dustypore about nine weeks, awaiting posting further east, and they were growing stale.

The driver did no tricky stuff through their gates. The sentry wouldn't have jumped aside, for one thing. He looked as if he could eat a jeep, complete with gunner driver and lady welfare officer, in a sandwich for his tea, any day of the week. We tooted, signalled and were sent through with correct precision. Up the straight, dusty, rutted track, with its boundary posts freshly whitened, through lines of tents which seemed to strain to attention against their ropes.

'Them tents is flamin' hell to sit in, /mam,' volunteered the gunner. 'Ain't no shade up this end, solid rock under that dust. Swimmin'-pools *and* waterfalls in the monsoon. All right for them Toughs; they jist ignores water. Our battery was up here when the rains broke, and they had to move us out quick. Damagin' to the guns! We was wetter than them, but we was told to shake oursels dry. What a bloo-oomin' life . . .' And he whistled cheerily.

Heavy drops of rain, a last legacy of the departed monsoon, fell as we slowed to pass an orderly queue of Toughs, lined up with their mugs beside a buffalo-drawn water-cart. One Tough had emptied his liquid quota over the buffalo's head, but got no appreciable thanks or reaction; the massive jaws went on chewing placidly while the drops trickled down. The Good Samaritan went to the bottom of the queue again while his mates laughed, and gave him advice.

'Wisht I'd a camera,' began my driver. 'Them Toughs drinking *water*!'

'You don't need a camera. There's a painting of that scene in a London art gallery. Only there's two other carts behind the water-cart; they're full of wounded men. Same regiment, only different clothing; and same water, only it's poured out of goatskins, not a tank with a tap. It was painted at the time of the Mutiny.'

'Jeepers! Whenever I gets homesick for Dustypore, I'll posh meself up to visit that paintin'. I can lean up agin it and grieve, I don't think!'

I was already drenched as I dashed across the rain-swept veranda of H.Q. block, and into the Orderly Room.

'Colonel at home?' I demanded, wringing out my beret and wiping the rain off my face. 'This should help my complexion.'

The colonel was at home. I was shepherded up the veranda to his office under a coloured golf umbrella held at a shielding angle. The C.O. was six foot three, with a deceptively gentle face and manner. His adjutant was with him.

'This is nasty, very nasty.' The C.O. laid the signal down.

'Poor little woman. The chap's not worth it. We've got a welfare file on him already.' The adjutant searched in a steel cabinet and brought out a bulky brown wrapper.

I skimmed through it quickly. Embarkation leave marriage to a girl he had known for years. Peacetime occupation: assistant in a drapery store in a small county town. Wife had had miscarriage four months after Ball's departure. He blamed her; said she had tried it. Medical certificate stated it had been due to worry over him. When the regiment left the Middle East for India, posted first to a southern station, Ball had met another girl and stopped writing to his wife. She had written to the War Office, thinking he was a casualty. Families' Welfare had managed to patch up a reconciliation of sorts. They reported that Mrs. Ball was very depressed, still suffering after-effects of the miscarriage and very much in love with her unsatisfactory husband. Wife's parents were anxious for the marital peace to be restored. Husband's mother was dead, but his father was equally anxious. Ball now wanted his wife to divorce him, apparently, so that he could marry the girl in the southern station. It couldn't be anyone in Dustypore; the only girls available to the B.O.R.s were the W.A.C.(I), and if Ball, a married man, had been out more than once with any of them, their Commandant would have stopped it before now. Mabel Roff kept her Command out of serious trouble.

'What do you advise now? The man's a blackguard, a crime sheet as long as my arm.'

'Always? Or only since he came to India?'

Private Ball had led a blameless life until he went to that southern station. After that his record was impressive, even for a Tough. His two officers looked at me.

'Well, this news may upset him enough to want reconciliation. Then you can try to get him compassionately posted home. But if he's really attached to this other girl, he won't go home, and without sworn mutual reconciliation, he can't get home and you can't post him.' A sense of deadlock kept the three of us silent.

'You know, he's just *got* to stay sober and out of cells, for a month at least. To give him a chance to think straight and give me a chance to get cracking on him. But even if he is willing to be sensible, he may not stop drinking when he does get home. What he needs is someone at his elbow, to keep his elbow down.'

The colonel's jaw dropped, but he pulled himself together and leaned over his table quite impressively. 'I hesitate to think you can be serious, madam? But if you are, I really must

remind you that this is a fighting unit of grown men, not a—*a* School of Temperance. You'll have him and this—this elbow guard of his the laughing-stock of Dustypore.'

'What does that matter? He must get his affairs straightened out sometime or other, so why not now? How long has he got to serve out here still?'

'Twenty months,' supplied the adjutant.

'Well, then. He won't improve, wherever you're posted. He's due for a smart kick in the pants without any more delay, and he's going to be turned teetotal for a start.'

'Hasn't it occurred to you, madam, that his wife may be better off without him? If your people at home persuade her to get this divorce, she can make a fresh start.'

'Mrs. Ball doesn't want a fresh start, she wants her husband back. Families' Welfare don't advise divorce whenever snags arise. We're not discussing a change of air or clothing, Colonel. This is marriage, a partnership which has to be toughened up to take a strain. Besides . . . ' and I explained the divorce laws. ' . . . so, you see, proceedings can't be started for months yet. Months of uncertainty, hoping and waiting, for Mrs. Ball. She probably won't do anything about it for the whole twenty months, hoping this character will change his mind again. She'll be charged with attempted suicide, either bound over or put on probation. Most probably the court will hand her over to her mother's care. And her parents can't just sell ~~up~~ their home and her father can't just throw up his job, to take her away. She'll have to stay in that small town, with plenty of gossip, and perhaps nothing at the end of it, after all her patient waiting. My orders are clear in that signal. Reconciliation essential by every possible means. That wasn't put in for nothing. So I'm going to water down Private Ball.'

The colonel cleared his throat harshly. 'This welfare business! You're here to advise me, madam. If I feel I can't accept your advice, you must overrule me and act on your own authority.' There was a definite note of hope in his voice, but I had to disillusion him.

'I can't overrule Commanding Officers. That comes under things prejudicial to discipline. But you can leave this to me, if you like? Unofficially?'

'Yes,' he nodded. 'I do like. No one must tell me about any elbow guards though, officially or unofficially.'

'Would you have Ball in and tell him now?'

Private Ball was a lanky six-footer; satisfactory enough below the neckline, but nothing very special above. Yet for this lump of manhood a woman had tried to destroy herself.

The colonel waved a finger, and adjutant and R.S.M. withdrew.

I watched Ball's face carefully as the news was broken to him. He moistened his lips and paled a very little.

'Well? Anything to say about all this?'

'N-no, sir.'

'No, sir? What d'ye mean, no, sir? Here's your wife cutting her throat or swallowing poison, and you've got nothing to say! Speak up!' Far from tactful, all this, but I didn't come into it, yet.

'Does it say—is Jen—is she bad, sir?'

The colonel looked at me inquiringly.

'No, it can't be serious, or the signal would have stressed it.'

'Well then, speak up. Are you going back to your wife?'

Private Ball set his jaw. 'N-no, sir.' His eyes glazed as the C.O.'s fist crashed down on the table. It was high time I intervened.

'You mean, now that you know your wife is not seriously hurt, you still want her to get a divorce, so that you can marry this other girl out here? Is that it?'

'Yes, mam.' He was glad to be able to look at me. 'I'm going to take my demob. out here. I'm not going home. I like it out here.'

'You don't love your wife any more? You wouldn't consider bringing her out here?'

Ball's face was scarlet. 'She wouldn't like it here. No, mam.'

'Go away and think it over; this must have been a shock. May he come along to my office this afternoon, sir?'

Ball went back to his chores. I sat and listened to his Commanding Officer's views on him for a few minutes.

The rain had stopped and the sun was drying up the puddles with a magical touch. I called in at the R.S.M.'s office further down the block. He was a very nice man, and he seemed pleased to see me. I explained what I had in mind.

'Does the C.O. know?' he asked at once.

'This is between you and me. C.O.s are like husbands; they've got to be kept ignorant for their own good sometimes. Now, can you think of anybody?'

'It won't work, mam. Couldn't you just talk to the lad?'

'I'm going to talk to the lad, but he's got to be in a state to pay proper attention. Don't you know anyone who would oblige me?'

'The whole regiment'll oblige you and willing. But this

don't come within the regulations. He's not worth all your trouble, mam. And there'll be trouble, with him.'

'I'll have to think up something else then, I suppose. Did you ever meet this girl down south? What's she like?'

'They're all the same,' but he didn't explain the kind of sameness he had in mind. 'That southern station is a bad place for young troops. I've known a regiment couldn't take their posting out of it, pre-war. Rotten with V.D.'

'Why don't they stop sending young troops there, then?'

The R.S.M. eyed me. But he always did his best to justify the ramshackle arrangements of the British Army to me. He called it explaining routine. He explained again now. 'Look now, mam. Take Salisbury Plain. That's a big place—draughty you might call it, and bad for the troops on account of their being liable to catch cold and get their feet wet. But it happens to be the right place for the job to be done. Which is training them. Soldiers are men, and we train 'em to act like men, not coddled kids.' The R.S.M. was leaving his flank exposed, as usual.

'The training is a credit to Salisbury Plain, then, when they go to this southern place,' I assured him nastily. 'They do behave like men there. Ball is one of these great big soldier he-men, but he's got to start acting like a husband. He won't be a soldier always.'

The R.S.M. fingered his moustache. 'There's Sharkey Tate,' he said slowly. 'They're mates—same *basha*, next bunk. If you could interest him . . .' I asked to see S. Tate without delay.

'Well, mam, it's awkward. He's in cells at this very moment. He'll be out tomorrow, I'll send him straight round to you.'

That was no use at all. I had to have a clear-cut plan of action when I interviewed Private Ball that afternoon. I had to be ready to obstruct, where necessary. So I sat and stared at the R.S.M., and he stared back. Solid, steady, reliable. I took him into my confidence completely. I hadn't mentioned desertion to the colonel—one can hardly raise such a subject with a Commanding Officer, but the R.S.M. would understand. 'I know the colonel and the adjutant and you all think I'm sloppy, fussing about keeping this chap sober for a few weeks. I know all right, though you keep your faces straight. But all three of you are Regulars, the army is your normal job in life. I hardly ever get a Regular in my office because his wife has been unfaithful, or vice versa. Your troubles are all ordinary: illness, hard up, the children needing this or that. If there is any misbehaving, both sides manage to keep quiet

about it. Long separations and the breaks in your married lives are normal routine. But these other chaps are different. Their married lives would have been steady, too, if it hadn't been for the war. Most of them will still be all right if they get a little help over the sticky bits. Are you happily married?

'Yes, mam, very happy.'

'Didn't you ever get friendly with another woman when you were away from your wife and wonder if she'd suit you better?'

'I—I—well, mam. Maybe once or twice, early on. But not now. I'm settled now. The wife and me, we're middle-aged.'

'Private Ball will be saying the same thing twenty years from now, when he's got India out of his system. The woman on the spot is always in a favourable position.'

'The women's to blame, mostly. Begging your pardon, mam.'

'I suppose so. We're lowering our standards all round.' Yet how gladly I would have lowered my own, if I could have relived just one hour! 'I get so many cases with children involved. It frightens me, these ten-year-olds and eleven-year-olds, hearing and seeing what they have to see and hear. The most impressionable age; they're too old to forget it and young enough for it to mar their characters permanently. That's why I twist everything I can to get the fathers home. All the C.O.s think I'm unbalanced on the subject. More urgent cases, they remind me; but what is more urgent than sending a steady father back to steady a shaken home and lick the fear of God into his kids before it's too late? The Englishman's home is his castle, and they're falling round his ears like ninepins, and I don't mean with the bombing. Just war conditions in general. How long is it since you've been home?'

'1936 the regiment left U.K. Stationed in India in 1939, and the wife went home then with our boy. She—I haven't seen her since. No leave. Our lad was killed in March.'

'I'm sorry—it was impertinent of me to bring your private life into all this.'

'It's a relief to talk about it to someone like yourself, mam. The wife . . .' He did talk and I listened. 'You take a lot of trouble over us men, and the regiment knows it.'

'Well, this Ball's a young fool, and not much good, but his wife needs a helping hand.'

'She doesn't seem such a strong character, neither,' he pointed out. 'A nice pair they'll make.'

'They may make a nice pair, after all. It's not the beginning of married life that's so important, it's the end. The growing old together.'

'That's so, mam,' he agreed simply.

'Anyway, that wasn't what I started out to say. Your regiment will move any day now, and if this affair has gone as far as I think it has, Ball will be anxious to see this girl before he goes. That's natural enough, but he won't get leave now. He may go absent without leave, especially if your orders are for Java or Japan, and that's desertion, isn't it, when a unit's under posting notice?' The R.S.M. nodded soberly. 'He'll get picked up, of course, but he'll have to serve his sentence in India?' Another nod. 'He'll have all his pay stopped, and his wife will get no allowances either. He'll probably blame her for it all—not giving him his freedom et cetera—and I think he'd be a different kind of a chap altogether after serving that sentence. A thorough bad lot. I've just *got* to find out where he thinks his marriage has gone wrong and somehow—somehow, get him persuaded to wait a while. . . .'

'Sharkey Tate's a Regular, too, mam. I'll send for him now.'

'I'd rather see him in his cell, if you don't mind? He'll be more at ease, and there won't be anything official about all this.'

The cells were round the back of H.Q. block, standing in an isolated line, built of red bricks which glared in the sunlight. The rear wall faced us, blank, with a row of small gratings near the top.

'This Sharkey Tate goes in for a lot of Army slang talk. He doesn't notice it himself; it comes all natural like to him. I'm a bit rough with my tongue, but *him* . . .' The R.S.M. made heavy weather of his apologies as we walked across the uneven ground.

I helped him out. 'You mean he swears. I've heard a lot of this army slang, and there can't be many more new words.'

'Sharkey will surprise you, mam, when he hears he's to stay sober to oblige. But I'll shut his mouth for him quick.' This would never do. We were within a few yards of the building, and I stopped short.

'May I just talk to him by myself, please? If he makes a mistake and swears at me, I can shut him up without help.'

'Well, mam, you're welfare, and you know what you're doing. I wouldn't really want to have to take official notice of any remarks passed. He's doing seventy-two hours.'

A sentry came pacing slowly along, beside another blank wall, built in front of the long row. The R.S.M. beckoned. 'The captain wants to interview Sharkey Tate. Take her in.'

'Yessir.' The R.S.M. looked piercingly at the guard chap and the guard chap stared back. 'Yessir, very good, sir,' he repeated.

‘I’ll wait for you, here, mam. Sing out if there’s anything...’ Private Tate was in the third room along. Two startled faces showed at the bars as we passed the first rooms. The cells had solid wooden doors. For the rest of their frontage, iron bars came half-way down to meet the brickwork and the occupants looked out on to the brick wall. The sentry laid his bayonet carefully down against this wall, and as his keys rattled, a row of half-faces shot through the bars all down the line. Half-faces as far as the bars would permit them to stick out. The half-faces had whole voices. They all commented. I began to fear that Sharkey would be anti-welfare minded before the interview even got under way.

‘Shut up, you b——s; it must be Sharkey’s wife...’ I was grateful for this voice, as the others died away at once. In an impressive silence, I entered the cell. It was as hot as a furnace.

Sharkey had retreated, to sit on the bedboard against the back wall. His head was in his hands.

‘Shun!’ ordered the sentry, crisply, but not putting his heart and full lung-power into the business.

Private Tate came up to attention, and my heart sank as I looked at this new colleague. He was a very small man, with the face of a mocking rat. His eyes were watering.

‘I’ll be handy when you’re ready, mam.’ The sentry locked me in and then stood back against the opposite wall. I gestured to him to get on with his work, out of earshot, and he went, reluctantly.

‘Now, Private Tate, be at ease.’ I was affable, but the little man took no notice, he just stood stiffly and looked at me, almost beseechingly. ‘Stand at ease, then?’ He obeyed that at once, but his eyes still searched my face, anxiously.

‘Vi’let? ...’

Violet? ‘Tell us, mam,’ implored Private Tate.

It dawned on me. ‘Do you mean your wife?’ A violent nod. He did mean his wife. ‘I haven’t come about her. She’s all right, as far as I know.’

What a difference a smile can make! Sharkey’s face was like a sunrise. He sat down again and slid his stern all the way along the board, arose and added a final polish with his hand.

‘It’s clean,’ he offered, doing the honours of his house. ‘And no b—— splinters.’ I sat down.

Sharkey was clad in khaki shorts. He reached up for his shirt, hanging on a nail, and hastily dragged it on.

‘Private Tate,’ I began formally, ‘will you promise me not to repeat a single word of our conversation? It’s confidential. Can those other chaps hear, if we talk low?’

'They ain't listenin', thinkin' it's me wife in trouble.'

'Will you promise, then? Not even when you're . . . ' /
hesitated. Tact was essential.

'Blotto,' supplied Private Tate without any tact at all. 'Nor even when I'm stinkin'—What's yer trouble, mam?'

I told him what was required of him. He said 'No' without using the actual word 'No' once. His extensive swear power and range could only be recorded under colourless asterisks, now that he had found his 'form'.

'Me stay on the asterisk waggon a whole asterisk month? Wet-nursing that young asterisk? Not on your asterisk life. Not asterisk well me, mam.'

'Not exactly on the waggon. Just soberish.'

'Same asterisk thing. The young asterisk ain't worth it. You let that wife of his'n get clear of him. She'll be asterisk well better off without the asterisk.'

'The R.S.M. said you would help me. He said you were the only man I could count on to do it properly.'

'The R.S.M. can asterisk himself.'

'His wife can't get a divorce yet. She doesn't want her freedom, anyway; she wants him. She'd rather be miserable with him than happy with someone else. Some women are like that. I want Ball to stay out of trouble and have a chance to think things over properly.'

'He's got too much asterisk time to think. All of us has got too asterisk much time to asterisk well think. That's what sets us drinkin'.'

'Have you ever seen this other girl?'

He had. He minced about the cell, making expressive figures-of-eight with his hands, rolled up his eyes extravagantly and gave out the coarsest wolf-whistle I ever hoped to hear. Seconds later, the echoes came back from every other cell, with roars of rude laughter. They were reassured about their cell mate's domestic troubles, and saw no need for further reverent silence. The guard arrived at the double. 'Mam?'

Sharkey was still busy with his snakes and seven veils.

'It's all right, thanks. He's only showing me something,' and I waved the sentry away. He went even more reluctantly, to face a barrage of ribaldry which cackled up and down the frontage. The R.S.M. would be getting fidgety, too.

'Thanks, Sharkey. I've got a clear enough picture of the lady now. She's poison?'

He nodded emphatically and gave the thumbs-down sign.

'That's a relief; she doesn't seem to be the type to fancy hanging on for years, waiting for him to get his divorce.'

Sharkey, has he ever hinted to you that he might go A.W.O.L.? Desertion means a prison sentence.'

'That's what I asterisk well told him,' began Sharkey and fell silent.

'I can't explain it all properly, but I need time to keep talking to him, and I must have someone keeping an eye on him with a few odd words of advice while they're doing it. I can't tell my H.Q. I've failed without trying everything, once. I want him left behind here when the unit leaves, to be sent back home compassionately. Mrs. Ball must have another chance. That's my job, what I've been sent out here for, to stop B.O.R.s from staying out here and deserting their wives at home. One of my jobs, anyway. Sharkey'—and I rose to go—'are you going to help me?'

He was leaning against the wall, staring at me.

'Cor asterisk asterisk the asterisk asterisks! Twenty-eight asterisk dry days to please you! I'll asterisk well do it, mam! I'll watch out fer him, see he don't skip, get too drunk or fightin'. I'll be in trainin' fer the biggest asteriskest blind I've ever had.'

In training. In training! The plan I had been fumbling for clicked into shape in my mind. Dustypore Sports! Five weeks ahead! It was to be a great occasion, spun out to last a week, with gentry all the way from Delhi in attendance and a general's wife to present the prizes. Every unit had entries in every event, and training was in full swing. The Brigadier had decided on an innovation. There was to be a fencing contest and he was personally giving a silver cup. No B.O.R. in Dustypore knew one end of a foil from the other, so all the entrants, one from each unit, were starting from scratch. The Toc H padre had been asked to officiate as trainer and the Brig. had lent him a handbook on the subject. He was not attached to any one particular unit and was regarded as completely impartial and unbiased, for training purposes. The padre had very unorthodox ideas on sport; he approved highly of the æsthetic side of training, the cutting down of food and the cutting out of alcohol. His class toed the line with him daily in a tent specially erected for the purpose, and they were undergoing a course of treatment which was fast making them all double-jointed, amongst other benefits. Their special diet was rigidly enforced. Every cookhouse had been issued with the sheet of instructions compiled by the padre himself in conjunction with Truby King. The fencer fraternity demolished their vitamins bitterly, and their mates gave them admiration but no sympathy. Water and weak tea were the only stimulants

permissible, with orange-juice on Sundays. Already they stood out from their fellows, with a noticeable gaunt, dedicated look, and they had all taken to coughing pathetically when they passed their officers or were asked to lift a fatigue bucket. The whole set-up might have been specially thought out for Private Ball, in this my hour of need. Every unit had entered for every event except the Tough Regiment. Their stay in our midst had been expected to be weeks, not months; they stood ready to move out at short notice. But that could be remedied; it must be remedied. Private Ball should join the padre in the tent tomorrow at latest. He could even start his special diet tonight.

The racket outside had been steadily growing in volume—the other cells were becoming insistent on welfare interviews in their turn, on the pattern set by Private Tate. The sentry seemed rather hot and flustered as he paced slowly by. His glances in held urgent appeal.

‘If you’re allowed to speak to them,’ I called out clearly, ‘can you tell that lot to shut up? I want to think. And their R.S.M.’s waiting for me just around the corner, if they’re interested.’

Magical initials! R.S.M.! Like the crack of doom in any B.O.R.’s ears. They shut up quick. I almost shut up myself.

‘Asterisk the R.S.M.,’ muttered Private Tate and just stopped himself from spitting in time. He had to lick it back with a fast gulp.

The more I considered it, the more I fancied the idea of entering Ball for the Sports. For several events.

‘Sharkey, can he run? Fast, I mean?’

‘Asterisk if I know. I’ve never chased the asterisk.’

‘Well, can he jump, then?’

‘Leapfrog, you mean leapfrog?’ Sharkey stared.

‘No. White City stuff. Ten feet over a bar and all that. I’ve had a brainwave! The Sports! Why shouldn’t he do something worth while for his regiment? I’m going to have him entered for all the heavy stuff. Cross-country running and throwing hammers. And the fencing, especially the fencing! That should sweat the beer and nonsense out of him!’ I almost licked my own lips.

Sharkey Tate was beginning to look an unpleasant sight. His face matched the brickwork and moisture ran down it freely. Even his voice was only twenty per cent when he got it to operate.

‘SWEAT the BEER . . .’ he squeaked and had to fight for breath. ‘SWEAT the BEER . . . cor stuff the Christmas cockerill You’ll RUIN the b—— R.S.M.!’

If there was one thing which irritated me more than any other in Dustypore, it was the way the British Army took me up. Time and time again I found my army audience and I had diverged from the issue at hand. Wishful thinking most of it, too. Still, I had to smile, this time. The R.S.M. was a very portly man.

'I meant Ball.' Then another thought struck me and made me laugh out loud. 'My driver would call the R.S.M. cruel fat! He'd give him a good shove off on a donkey.'

Sharkey slid down the wall on to the floor. The thought of his R.S.M. struggling along the sands was too much for him, apparently.

'Are you all right? I've got an aspirin in my bag.' Sharkey was palely yellow now. I was genuinely alarmed. 'What about some brandy? I'll get some . . .'

'Brandy . . .' he wheezed, looking half senseless. I was rattling the bars for the guard when his voice came pleadingly.

'Fer C—— sake, *mam*! Don't ask . . .'

So I waved the panting sentry away again. When you're doing seventy-two hours for over-indulgence, in the British Army, you can hardly expect the guard to bring you a hair of the dog that bit you.

'Flap yourself with this, then,' and I handed Sharkey O.C. Signals' hanky. He flapped feebly once or twice, then wiped his brow. The hanky came away patterned. He shook it helplessly, but the pattern didn't drop off. 'Never mind, keep it. When you've washed it, take it back to Major Kay of the Signals.' We were wasting a lot of time. 'Honestly, Sharkey, this isn't what I expected at all. I thought you were a welfare-eating tiger. You swear far too much in front of women'—my audience changed colour again. A rainbow repertoire of facial tints, this chap had—but the only help I need with you is lifting you up off the floor. Pull yourself together at once.'

'Yes, *mam*.' I felt like a boa-constrictor, the way he eyed me.

We returned to Ball's affairs. I asked for pertinent comment.

'Our unit's not entered,' he pointed out at once.

'No, but the colonel rather hinted this morning that he was reconsidering it.'

'Ball can't fence, *mam*. He's a mucker with a bayonet.'

'He can be a mucker at fencing, too, for all I care. It's the training he's got to have.'

'You won't get him to enter, *mam*. I wouldn't, neither.'

'Won't he? When the entire regiment hears that they've got a chance to snatch the silver cup from every other unit at the last moment? If only their champion will cut out drinking and follow the padre's diet-sheet? Would *you* refuse?'

'By God, no,' and he meant it.

'Well, then, the whole regiment will be keeping an eye on his elbow; you can supervise generally and I can go ahead.'

'The lads won't swallow that bit about him being an asterisk—beg pardon, mam, being a champion. They know him, the young—youngster.'

'They'll believe when they see the other units worried. I'll start the other units worrying.'

'It's at nights they breaks clear . . .' Sharkey looked at me straightly. 'I ain't a heavy sleeper 'n he is. But them fencers has to kip in their tent. Stretched at attention fer hours fer their poshtures. They likes that bit; they all sleeps hearty. . . .'

I thought hard, because Sharkey couldn't be expected to sit up nights, while Ball put in a bit of extra sleep in the daytime.

'I've got it! Sleep-walking! Tell the *basha* that the excitement may make him sleep-walk. Hint he's told you he used to sleep-walk before his school sports. He might fall and break his right arm and then they'll lose that cup.'

'He'll get his asterisk neck—beg pardon, mam, his neck broke if the *basha* gets wind . . .' He stopped.

'That's everything covered nicely, then,' I remarked with relief. 'If there should be a hitch anywhere, no sports or Ball really heartbroken without the colonel's eye on him, the R.S.M. will tell you tomorrow. He can just say "No, Sharkey, nothing doing," and you'll understand.'

'No, Sharkey, nothin' doin', like a ruddy barmaid . . .' grinned Sharkey and then added, very earnestly, 'No offence, mam. . . .'

'It's a pity she doesn't say it oftener to you,' I told Private Tate kindly.

The troops in Dustypore suffered from a curious kind of nervous affliction. It seemed to make their eyes pop, their jaws drop, their heads shake and their whole bodies stiffen and start violently. Sharkey Tate was the worst case of it I'd met so far; I left him hanging on to his iron bars.

I waved good-bye to the half-faces; they wolf-whistled back, cheerfully.

'It's all tied up,' I assured the R.S.M. 'Private Tate had quite a brainwave.' That ought to do Sharkey a bit of good in a quarter which seemed to matter. 'He's got every man-jack of you lined up, as elbow guards, a twenty-four hour rota. . . .' The R.S.M. half-tripped over a loose stone, and I waited while he paused to give it a very violent kick.

'All of us, mam?'

I brought him up to date with Ball's affairs and his face

brightened all the time and he was laughing when we stepped back on to the H.Q. veranda. 'I will admit it's been a sore disappointment, not entering these Sports. If the C.O.'s reconsidering, we'll have a crack team raised overnight for him. If you'd just mention that, mam? This Ball's no good—just spoil our chances.'

'Just you wait a minute——' The man was quite forgetting the whole point of entering. 'Ball is going to carry your fencing colours, and he must be allowed to enter for the cross-country run as well. It'll be twenty miles at least? Apart from the miles he'll run, training?'

'Just three miles, mam. But the heat will make it seem like a hundred. The lad could enter for that, without damaging us.'

'Who'll be in charge of the training?'

'Me. And it'll be sharpish, to make up for the lost time.' I could see it would.

O.C. Toughs agreed to another hold-up of his regimental routine by Families' Welfare. He listened in silence and I made it brief. '... and you'll probably end up with the Brigadier's cup as well as Plassey,' I half-promised, and waited anxiously on the very edge of my chair.

He h-h-rumphed. 'There seems no reason why we shouldn't enter. Late as it is. We're likely to be here for some few more weeks, I fancy. Whether it brings Ball to his senses or not,' he smiled grimly, 'it will do the men no harm. Quite the reverse. There's not much for them in Dustypore. One thing, though. Private Ball must not be entered for any event without his permission. I cannot countenance forced entries.'

'I am not allowed to interfere with the discipline of any unit,' I reminded him primly.

'But. . . ?'

'I do try to persuade the B.O.R.s to do the right thing by their families.'

'I hope you will keep on trying with the men under my command.'

'Well, then. Would you willingly enter the padre's tent and get double joints and a diet-sheet when you'd much rather be drunk and disorderly?'

'No, I most cert—— Does Ball fence, by the way?'

'I shouldn't think so. He's a mucker with a bayonet.' The colonel started violently. He would hardly care for this technical criticism of his men, of course. 'I'll have to tell the padre the truth—that he hasn't really got a champion. He's such a lamb, he might consult Ball on knotty points and——'

'Don't tell *me* any more,' O.C. Toughs broke in hastily.

'When my wife rejoins us, she's full of this welfare stuff. . . .' He almost shuddered.

The adjutant was sent for and briefed about issuing company orders without delay. He went out again, jubilant. It seemed to me, with all this enthusiasm to enter, it was a pity no one had challenged the C.O. before. He had probably been waiting to be asked to change his mind.

'Good luck,' said the tall man quietly and shook hands.

A quarter past twelve! What a morning!

My driver gave me the news at once. The jeep had been standing outside the Orderly Room. 'They're entering for the Sports,' and he jerked his head over his shoulder.

'So I heard.'

'Every event. They've got crack runners and jumpers.'

'They've got a crack fencer, too.' I was burning my boats with a vengeance now. 'He's rather out of practice, but it should all come back to him. He may even have to be penalized, you know, sort of handicapped.'

'Cor! How'll they do that, mam?' How would they do it?

'Oh, tie a—a weight or something on his sword arm, I suppose.'

'Strewth! What's his name, mam?' The driver was avid for details.

'I didn't quite catch it.' Better leave a loophole, Ball might want immediate reconciliation this afternoon. In that case, Sharkey would have to enter the tent instead. It would do him good, too. 'There's only the one snag. It seems he's a heavy drinker, but if they can keep him off the beer long enough, the rest of you can give up hope.'

'We was the favourites up to now, us gunners.' The driver was depressed. 'What's all this about the beer? What's it do to fencers?'

'Well, you need a steady eye. For—for lunging straight and true. Two or three glasses of beer during training and you've had it. The hops—it's something to do with them. Unsockets the eye. That's the—er—technical term for it.'

'Jeepers!' The gunner was impressed. 'Jus' fencin', mam?'

'Well, fencing in particular. Some of the other sports may train on beer entirely; they probably do.' They would if they could, in Dustypore! 'But it's sheer murder for fencers; that I do know.' And for one in particular. 'Watered carrot-juice is the beverage for swordsmen.' That should help the padre with his diet-sheets.

'Donkey feed!' I had forgotten I was talking to 'the trade'. Perhaps I was rather overdoing it. I went about on a new tack.

‘The R.A.F. pilots have to eat carrots, to help them fly in the dark.’ There were no R.A.F. personnel in Dustypore to call me to account if this were slander. ‘Donkey feed or not, a carrot per day keeps the gremlins at bay! But weak tea is just as effective.’

‘The R.A.F. don’t drink weak tea, mam.’

‘No—o,’ I admitted.

‘Swords and gremlins and carrot-juice! Holy Joe! My ole man will be interested. He . . .’

I had said enough. Within the hour the Tough Regiment would know they had an expert fencer, badly out of training but a dead cert. if he stuck to his diet-sheet. Any passionate disclaimers would be put down to modesty and later, if persisted in, to obstinacy. The result would be the same either way. A human wall would go up around the dead cert. to cut out offers of hop-laden refreshment from other interested parties. Private Ball or his•buddy, Private Tate, would be safely teetotal for the next five weeks, in most jealous hands. By nightfall all Dustypore, to the outermost camp—the Commandos—would know what their fencing hopes depended on. Scoffers would be regarded with bleak suspicion. No amateur fencer would be allowed even the comfort of a beer-laden breath within smelling distance. They might escape carrots, unless popular outcry induced the padre to import special sacks from Bombay.

As we drew up at my block, the gunner requested a repeat of one item. ‘It unsockets the eye,’ I obliged him. I felt a bit shaky, but in a few hours no one would be able to remember who had first started this direful hare. The gossiping sex!

Two B.O.R.s awaited my return on the veranda. The corporal followed me into the office.

‘Signalman Anderson called, mam. He couldn’t wait. He’d been inoculated, had his medical but’—the corporal consulted the slip of paper in his hand—‘he had to go to be documented, have his hair cut and be weighed afterwards. Airlift he’s on, mam. Head shaved, toe-nails cut, ears syringed and carry your false teeth. To cut down the weight.’

‘Oh. Was he—upset, Batters?’

‘He left a message for you, mam. I wrote it down,’ and the paper was handed over. ‘Sig. Anderson is glad his mother does not have to suffer any more.’

‘Come in, the first of you, please,’ I called.

Lack of mail from his girl friend. No letters for nearly a month. ‘Any lengthy intervals between letters before this time?’

'No, mam.'

'Are you engaged?'

'No. I didn't want to tie her down, like.'

'Did she want to be tied down?'

'I think so. Yes, mam.'

'It's your own fault, then, if she has found someone else. You can't have it both ways. The reply will be back in about ten days. Your C.O. will read it to you. Come and see me again if you're not satisfied with it. Oh, you might let me know if you get any news before our report comes. Anything else worrying you?'

'No, just the letters.'

'Good-bye, then. Keep on writing, yourself, until you hear what has gone wrong, and don't, whatever you do, start nagging her. Next, please.'

'It's the wife. She's all behindhand with the rent.' The landlord's gettin' an eviction order if she don't pay up the lot. All our three kids has had the measles and whoopin'-cough, so the wife had to stay home. She makes the odd bob washin' dishes at a Lyons' place round our corner. The wife's ma lives with us. She's jus' got her pension, and I don't let the wife touch that. The ole girl had to get new teeth, top and bottom; it took a bit of findin', to square the lot.'

'How much is it?'

'Four pound, seventeen and threepence.'

'Can you increase your allotment? You would have to be sending the limit home, before I can ask for any grant.'

'I can't send another red cent, mam, and that's God's truth. The wife gets it all, bar about two bob I keeps back. I've give up drinkin' an' smokin'.' I made a note to check this with his Paymaster; I believed him all right, but welfare makes one wary.

'Our visitor will see your landlord for you. He can't get an eviction order against a serving soldier's wife unless she's keeping a disorderly house, or living in a tied agricultural cottage. All he can do is take your wife to court and get an order for weekly repayments. Our visitor would attend court too, of course, and speak for her. No magistrate would make it more than a shilling or two weekly repayment when all the circumstances are put forward properly. But we'll try for a grant from your Regimental Association; they may do something to help. And if our visitor has any local funds, she'll certainly help a little. Now write to your wife and urge her to be frank; tell her to mention any other little debts, and especially to remind the visitor about your mother-in-law's teeth.

She'll know where to claim for help towards the cost. But your wife must be frank about any other debts; make that clear. She'll have a chance to get herself put straight financially.'

'The wife won't like this charity. She'll pay it all back, given time.'

'Let's leave it all to the visitor. She knows her job and she'll straighten things out, without hurting your wife's feelings. Your C.O. will read out the report to you, but you'll hear all about it from home. Come in and tell me if you're satisfied. Now, is there anything else?'

Twenty-five minutes past one. The morning mail still unopened, and the pile had grown; the corporal had added hand-delivered letters from camps and depots. Case-files to be written up, reports and signals to be typed and three appointments for the afternoon, apart from Private Ball and any casuals. But O.C. Signals was waiting for his lunch. I skimmed through the letters to make sure nothing was urgent and then hurried back to the hotel.

He was sitting on the little veranda as I bustled breathlessly up the steps. 'Sorry I'm late, but I had a rush of custom at the last moment.'

'I've been very comfortable here. You've another customer waiting to see you over there,' and he pointed down the driveway. The 'customer' took this as a signal to advance. A Royal Engineer. He saluted and began to recite.

'I've brought back your washing, mam. I was to hand it to you personal with this letter from the C.O.'

O.C. Royal Engineers had a dry humour. He pointed out that if the Welfare Wash was to be delivered to him every week, he ought to have the list for checking purposes beforehand.

'I'll send a reply round this afternoon. Where is the stuff, anyway?' The bundle was on the bed with Run sitting on top, very much on guard. 'Oh, all right, then. Thank you.' But the R.E. still stood, waiting. 'What's the matter now?'

'The C.O. requests that you check it and give me the—the all clear, mam.'

'If there's anything missing, Captain Tarling and I wouldn't dream of blaming the Royal Engineers. Nothing of ours would fit any of them. Now, go away and say I'm satisfied.'

Major Kay had been an interested listener. I explained it all, shortly. 'The whole thing's disgraceful. Now, will you have a drink or shall we go over to lunch?' He had his drink and told me about Anderson.

'The old boy just said, "I think we'll let him go home, poor devil," nothing else.'

Over lunch I heard all about O.C. Signals' job in Civvy Street. It was my day for zoology; he stuffed animals for a living. But he made it all sound very interesting and demonstrated, with the bones of the fish course, various points I ought to watch out for when stuffing. We drank our coffee on the veranda, and at last he rose with a sigh. 'Back to the grind. I hope you'll invite me again. Or have dinner with me in the Mess one evening?'

He gave me a lift back to the office in his jeep.

'I've got piles of work for you this afternoon. I sometimes wonder if you frame my signals before you send them off. They take so long.'

'Never a delay, you can depend on us,' he promised, and I certainly could, after that. Life was made easy for a woman amongst thousands of lonely, homesick men.

Chapter 11

Afternoon

Private Ball came through the net curtains.

'Well, now, you've had a little time to think it over. Is there anything you would like me to do?'

'No, mam.'

'You don't feel you should go home, if you can? The colonel would have a shot at a compassionate home posting for you.'

'Jennie shouldn't have tried it. There was no need for her to do—anything like that. I told her straight. It was all above-board. I put it to her plain. Let's finish it. I offered her to get her freedom. I want to settle down out here. The weather and the life suits me a treat, and it'll be different when I'm out of the army.'

'What about a job? There can't be many openings for a draper's assistant out here?'

'My young lady's father says he'll speak for me on the railways. There's good jobs for us ex-soldiers on the railways, he says.'

'Oh. Well, your future seems secure enough, what about your other plans? I have to make out a report to send home, after this interview. Could you tell me what you had in mind exactly, about the divorce proceedings? Just so I can tidy up the loose ends? By the way, your young lady knew you were married already, of course? You haven't been deceiving her, I hope?' This was what barristers would call a leading question.

'I met her at a canteen dance, and I told her straight off she could dance nearly as good as Jen. She wanted to know who Jen was and I told her, my wife.'

So far, so good. No sympathy need be wasted on this other girl who had known from the start she was dealing with a man already married. Ball was still talking. 'My young lady's in the W.A.C.(I). She knows a bit about these things and welfare. She says Jennie will get her divorce quickly through them and Legal Aid. Then I'll apply for leave under the new scheme. I'm entitled to some leave with my service overseas. We can get married.'

'And if you're in Japan or Java?'

'I'd apply for leave in India.' It would certainly be easier to get leave granted for India than for U.K.

'Your young lady has given the matter some very careful thought. I take it, then, that you refuse reconciliation and any chance of C.H.P.? Your wife's attempted suicide makes no difference to your wish to desert her and stay out here?'

He mumbled something about that being the size of it.

'All right. Now, have you got your young lady into trouble yet? Or, rather, does she say you're the one who's got her into trouble?'

Private Ball was both shocked and indignant. 'My young lady's not that kind. She says to wait until we're married. My little girl——' This was almost incredible, though nothing was quite incredible in Families' Welfare.

'Now, Private Bertram Ball, just you listen carefully to me.' Well, Jennie lass, this is it. Into battle on your behalf, though this incredible babe in uniform is hardly worth bothering about. I shall say things now which will make me shudder to remember later, in cold blood. But it all has to be said, and you have no one else to say it for you. You shall have this nit-wit back, if it's humanly possible. One deep breath and punch for the jaw every time. 'Your little girl, as you so fondly call her, is not a good little girl. A good little girl does *not* make a bee-line for another woman's husband. Not when she has thousands of unmarried B.O.R.s, not to mention the Yanks, all around her. You're the very softest she's met so far, and she's playing up for all she's worth. I should say she is "that kind", as you put it. Your own *basha* probably knows more than a thing or two about her, though they may not like to tell you. You're due for a rude awakening, if you let it get as far as wedding bells. Do I make myself quite clear?' Private Ball could not speak or even nod. 'I'll go on, then. You're a bit of an idealist. You had the guts to stay a teetotaller

in the Tough Regiment until you met this little girl. But you're a drunk now, all right. The whys and wherefores of the sudden changeover don't interest me—I can guess, anyway. But your divorce does interest me. Jennie can't get a divorce: you haven't been married long enough. And even if you had been married long enough, you haven't given your wife any grounds. Playing kiss-in-the-ring with a good little girl isn't sufficient grounds, for British law. You've got to get into bed with your little girl and stay in bed until you're seen or can produce a hotel bill. The alternative is desertion, and you've got to be a wife deserter for years—seven years, it used to be. Do I still make myself quite clear?' I was doing fine, apparently. 'Jennie wants you back. I can't see why, myself. You're a lucky man; the boot's on the other foot for a good many of the chaps in your regiment. Yours wasn't a hasty war-wedding; you've known each other for years, and you've a lot more chance of happiness than most people. Jennie is your wife, and would have been the mother of your child——' Ball found his voice.

'She tried that. She fixed that. I wanted a kid, but she didn't want to start; she wanted to wait; she said so.'

'Whatever she *said*, she obviously gave in. Do you know Dr. Lane?'

'He's our doctor at home.'

'Have you known him very long, I mean?'

'He's always been our doctor. He was there when I was born.'

'He's a shocking liar, isn't he? And thoroughly unreliable?'

'Who says he is? He's all right.'

'You say he is. He signed the medical certificate,' and I passed it over.

'They didn't show me this. I never saw this before. The C.O. just read bits out.'

'The C.O. isn't supposed to show you medical certificates and neither am I. Why should he read it all out? He couldn't know he was talking to a suspicious ninny. He thought he was speaking to a normal anxious husband and tried to spare you. Do you still believe Jennie tried to get rid of your baby, with Dr. Lane aiding and abetting her?'

'No, mam.'

'Private Ball, I'm taking a lot of trouble over you, for your wife's sake. She may be in a hospital recovering or she may not. But she will be taken to court for attempted suicide. No court will do anything to her when Families' Welfare tell them about you, but it will be an ordeal. Worry over your

safety; a miscarriage which must have left her groggy; worry over your unjust accusations about the miscarriage; worry when you stopped writing and she believed you were a casualty; desperation when you chirpily told her to get a divorce; then attempted suicide which will haunt her whole life and, finally, an ordeal in a public court of law. For better or for worse, she promised you and, by heaven, Private Ball, it's been for worse all along the line as your wife. Your whole lifetime won't be long enough to make it up to her. And you sit there and chatter to me about your young lady being a good little girl! A woman who's been husband-hunting amongst the troops ever since the war started but never managed to quite pull it off until she found you willing to be soft-soaped.' I had to pause for breath, but Ball sat quietly, staring at the floor.

'That's enough about that, for now. You will report to me in here every third day until your regiment is posted. I'll fix times with your R.S.M. You're to be on special guard duty tonight, I'm told. It's pay-day and you may feel like drowning your sorrows, if you get half a chance. Tomorrow you start your training.'

He looked up, startled.

'You're the regiment's entry for the fencing contest, and you're also volunteering for the long-distance cross-country run. Your cookhouse will have applied for your special diet-sheet by now, but I can tell you tomorrow's menu. Mashed bran for breakfast, sieved sheep's brains with spinach for lunch and a coddled egg for your tea. No supper. If you fancy your char coloured after this, you'll have to add pure earth. Now, you can either tell the lads yourself you're their bonnie boy, or wait until they tell you. And don't hope they won't tell you. If you just hold your tongue and listen to them, you'll hear all about your past glories in the sporting world. You can act accordingly. A month's complete sobriety, a starvation diet and a chance to be a credit to the Toughs in the Sports, should knock a lot of childish nonsense out of your head and leave room for some adult thought. You can write to your wife; that's entirely up to you. But don't you let it be anything nasty, my lad. She can't take any more of your nastiness. As for your little girl, I hope you'll write to her and explain you can't hope to be free for years. Did you know you don't really love her, Private Ball?' He gaped at me. 'You'd have walked out of my office long ago if you did. . . .'

High-handed treatment, and I hoped my Delhi colonel would never get to hear about it. But when a girl wife is breaking

her heart and a man doesn't know what he really wants and has to march with his regiment, anything is worth trying, once.

There was five minutes to spare before the next appointment, so I wrote out the signal. 'PRIVATE BALL INTERVIEWED STOP REFUSES RECONCILIATION STOP NOT REPEAT NOT INFORM WIFE STOP LIKELIHOOD RECONCILIATION STOP INFORM REPEAT INFORM WIFE.' Cruel perhaps to raise false hopes, but Jennie Ball needed every prop we could give her for the next few weeks, at least. The corporal copied the message into his signal number-book and smiled.

The next 'interview' was in sight, plodding up the road, as I went back into my office. I got out his file. It had been a bad case: his wife had been attacked and criminally assaulted. I read her statement over again.

'... Alice and I had cycled to the village for choir practice. It was getting dark as we came home. Alice turned off at the fork, up to the farm. No, I was not frightened by myself. I cycle in to choir practice nearly every week. I was singing the hymn-tunes we had been practising. It happened where the road dips and runs through Dood's Wood. I did not see him until I was almost on him. He was standing by the side of the road, on the grass. No, I was not frightened. I go to the dances sometimes at the camps, because they're short of partners. Alice and me. The soldiers act just ordinary. Just chaffing and laughing. I pedalled a bit quicker to pass him, though. He stood so quiet. He stepped forward and shook me off the bike roughly. I screamed, but he threw me down and put his foot on my mouth. He held my mouth with his hand then and pulled me into the trees. He said he would choke me if I screamed any more. I think he was serious. My mouth was bleeding and I think my head was cut by that time, too. When he had ... and finished with me, I could not scream any more. I heard him kicking at my bike and he broke the lamp. Yes, that was afterwards, after he had ... No, I could not be sure if I would know him again. No, he was not an American soldier; he was English. But he had a birthmark—a funny red birthmark—high up on his thigh. His left thigh, facing me when he was standing. On the inside. I watched it all the time as he stood over me. ... It was very plain, the bike lamp seemed to be flickering on it. The bike was too smashed to ride, and I could not ride on it, anyway. So I left it and went home. I was too ashamed to tell Dad what had happened. Yes, I see now I should have told him, but I didn't want anyone to know; the village would have stared at me every time I went over there.

So I just said I'd had an accident with the bike. I think I fainted then. Dad knocked them up at the cottage; that's further up the road from us. Their Jim went for the doctor. Jim was home on leave. He's in the R.A.F. No, I did not tell the doctor either. Dr. Mann is in the army now. I would have told him. But this was a young man with spectacles. I couldn't tell such a young man. No, he did not question me or examine me, except my head and mouth. Jim fetched my bike next day. He asked me what had really happened, but I could not speak about it then—not after telling all those lies. It would have looked as if . . .'

The whole story had had to come out when she found she was pregnant. It might have been told earlier if she had had a mother to confide in, but she kept house for her widowed father. It had been a bitter affair. Jim, at his airfield, had been asked for a statement. He swore, on oath, that her story must be true, and gave details in confirmation. He had guessed, but held his tongue. 'She wanted it kept quiet obviously, and I thought she would be all right.' There were hopeless identity parades at the two large army camps nearby; group scrutiny to track down the birthmark; and appeals to any soldiers who could identify such a mark, to come forward. The last course, the appeal, had brought results, when things had seemed at their most hopeless. A B.O.R. reported that he knew a man with just such a birthmark. He was able to give the name and regiment, but added that he had been posted shortly after the assault. Authority had acted swiftly then: the attacker had been traced. But his punishment did not help his victim, except to prove the truth of her story to her husband. Her father had broken it by letter first, and then his wife had written. But Corporal Thorburn had not believed either of them. His regimental padre had brought him into my office, violent with rage and bitterness. Only a very few of the B.O.R.s came quietly into my office when they heard about their wives' unfaithfulness. The majority were brought in, violent, just like Thorburn. He called it adultery, dished up in lies, and cursed his padre for trying to call it anything else. I had had to ask the padre to leave us alone for a while. The furious voice had rung out along the whole block, and I had shut doors and windows. But every officer and B.O.R. within earshot was deaf on occasions like this. Him today, perhaps me tomorrow or next week or next month. Daisy, Jane, Mary, Ellen, Ann, Cathie, Dorothy, Hilda . . . don't do it to me, dear God, don't let her do it to me. . . . It made a very human bond of brotherhood among serving men.

'Now,' I had urged Thorburn when we were alone, 'swear for all you're worth—every word you know or can make up and never mind me. Then have a good howl. Now come on,' and I had started him off. The fierce swearing had stopped abruptly—it always did—but it had been half an hour before he sponged his face under the tap in the small back room. The padre had come back then and had reclosed the door.

'Kneel down.' And he had prayed for this husband and his wife, that the whole truth would come to light.

None of us knew what his thoughts were these days. Corporal Thorburn kept them to himself and soldiered on. No privacy for personal griefs in this dust-bowl among the eternal Indian hills. Just drills and guards and fatigues and the cinema and the canteen. And his *basha*. His *basha*, where the quiet sympathy of his mates washed coolly on his festering thoughts. The truth must have comforted him, but he did not want a compassionate home posting; not until the baby was born and had been adopted—that little innocent mite whose future was dark before it ever saw the light of this world. Whatever lay ahead of this child, boy or girl, orphanage or foster-parent, it could not stay with its mother, a perpetual reminder to the man who was not the father.

He had asked for this interview today.

'Hallo,' I greeted him. 'The water's boiling. You make the tea while I finish this typing. The cake's in the tin on the ledge. . . .' Anything, anything to give these hurt men a link-up with home.

We drank our tea and he told me his errand. 'It's her birthday, Tuesday fortnight.' A man of very few words, these days. 'Anything special in mind for her?'

He shook his head—no, he had nothing in mind; he was waiting for me to suggest the most suitable gift.

'What about a handbag? A really good one?' He brightened. 'Could you raise fifteen rupees?'

'Double that and more.' He was quite boastful.

'Well, say twenty-five rupees, then. I saw an absolute beauty for that price in the gunner officers' shop. They run a shop in a tent. I nearly bought this one for myself, as a matter of fact. It's black, with grey lizard-skin bands. It would go with almost anything. Do you think Rose would like that?' The money was handed over. 'I'll ask for a strong box to put it in, but I'll leave the packing to you. I can go round there tonight and you can pick it up here tomorrow, if you're passing?' He promised he would be passing, definitely. 'If I'm out, I'll leave it with Corporal Batters next door. He'll

give you a Customs label and fill it up for you, so there won't be much duty to pay. Batters is my Customs expert.'

Nothing would ever be the same for this chap. The gilt had been drubbed off his gingerbread thoroughly. But there was a steadiness about him now that was reassuring. Rose would find the tenderness and gentleness she needed with him. And time dulls the very sharpest sting.

Every office in the block except the mail room was closed when I switched off my light that evening. I handed in my batch of letters.

'You're late, mam. Major Fowler hasn't gone yet—his jeep's round the back, if you were wanting a lift?'

'Heaven bless you; that's my feet talking. Good night.'

The major set me down at the Gunners' Mess. I bought the handbag with strong box.

'Going my way?' a gunner captain sang out, and we walked to the hotel together. Twenty past seven as I went up the steps to my own front door. There would be just enough time for a bath. I was going out again at 7.30.

Evening

Every unit in Dustypore sent out every vehicle on wheels it could muster, when it was giving a party of any sort. Thus, every available woman was rounded up with unflagging zeal.

Tonight the young married couple in the room next door were to go with me to the cocktail party, in the C.O.'s own car. The husband might be only a junior captain, but his wife was a woman.

I heard her humming gaily as I had my bath. She was an enchanting vision in a pale blue evening gown when I stuck my head round the veranda partition to ask, 'Are you ready yet in there? The car's champing outside.'

'Come on round and have a drink first,' she invited.

Her husband answered for me. 'Damn it, you can't keep the colonel's car waiting about while you sit drinking. Wait until we get there. And take my advice and don't mix your drinks tonight, either. Stick to sherry if you must lap it up in a bucket.' His wife's scornful tra-la-la-ing spoiled the effect. Trouble had been brewing in this *ménage* for some time; they had been in residence for weeks now awaiting repatriation. It was too long, in Dustypore, where glamorous young wives had their heads turned with a superabundance of male admiration and attention. She was the spoilt only daughter of a prosperous Calcutta business-man; they had fallen in love, swiftly in love,

and been married only a few short months ago. They did not realize that their neighbours shared everything with them, through those betraying walls. I hinted, in vain. The young couple did not seem to notice the amused glances at the breakfast table. Not that it mattered; the occupants of the other two rooms had been birds of quick passage, and I was Families' Welfare with the iron of circumspection wedged in my soul.

'I'm not drinking at all,' I told them. 'I've got to dance for two hours at the canteen, then another blitzkrieg with some sergeants after that. Steady as she goes, that's me.'

I was almost envious, as the pale blue dress billowed in beside me, on the back seat. I was in uniform, stiffly starched, with long-sleeved tunic and tie. A real grim Hannah Welfare! The driver shut the car door very carefully, his head stuck through the window to be sure he wasn't catching any of the blue flounces.

'A canteen dance sounds rather fun. Could I come along, too? These cocktail do's with officers are deadly affairs.' The two khaki-clad backs in the front seat stiffened, but for different reasons.

'You can't go in that dress.' The captain spouse was grim.

'Why ever not? The soldiers can't be any clumsier than some of the officers. That drunken major last night——' This was no talk in front of soldier drivers. They may know their elders and betters get drunk, but no one tells them officially.

'Do either of you ride? And did you know you can borrow horses? You could ride out to the lake, and the Commandos will give you breakfast. It must be lovely in the early morning out there. . . .' Officers and their deplorable habits were forgotten. Blue Gown could ride.

The Mess was housed in a typical old Indian bungalow, long and low, with wide, shallow steps leading up to the spacious front veranda. Fairy lights were strung across the lawns from tree to tree and the regimental band played away for dear life. The colonel received us at the top of the steps, said how delighted he was to see us and bore Blue Gown off on his arm forthwith. 'I must get you a drink, dear lady. . . .' I grinned at the forlorn husband.

'Cheer up; she's yours for life.' But he wanted to swank about with her now.

The sergeant in charge of refreshment knew me of old. He piled fruit salad on a plate, added ice-cream and topped the lot with a mass of cherries.

'I'll carry that,' Ron's voice said behind me and his hand came under my elbow. 'Come and sit over here.' I followed

my fruit salad reluctantly across the lawn to a small table, well away from all the rest.

'Enough there to choke an elephant! I thought women just pecked at things, until I met you.' Ron laughed with his usual tact. 'I've got news for you, darling. We're going to Bombay together this week-end. Joined that Yacht Club racket specially. Booked a table for two for Saturday night. God! what a change, to have you all to myself at last.' And he leaned back in his cane chair, smiling. 'You'll never give yourself a chance to know me up here in Dustypore. Margaret, say you're pleased?'

Pleased! John and I had a table for two at the Yacht Club the Saturday nights I was down there.

'What's the matter?' Ron leaned forward again.

'I—Ron—I keep telling you it's no use. I'm already booked for—for every Saturday night in Bombay.'

'Are you?' His voice was very quiet. 'Your sister?'

'No. Ron, I think—there's someone else.'

'You *think*? Out with it, Margaret.' There was no earthly reason why I should feel so guilty.

'It's—it's—there's—a—a naval officer—he t-takes me out.'

'The British Navy! The b——b——s!' And that roused me to stuttering fury.

'I h-have to l-listen to a-army slang in m-my office, but I w-won't t-take it from y-you. You—you've ch-chased me up ever s-since I came here. I t-told you it was no use. You m-make me st-stutter and feel g-guilty——'

'In love with him, Margaret, aren't you? And he'll be in love with you, of course. And I've kept the field clear for him up here.' He sat and stared down at his hands.

'I'm sorry, Ron. But you wouldn't take no, and it wasn't any business of yours, that I could see. I hope he'll ask me to marry him.' Blurting it all out like this when I hadn't known myself until this minute. 'It's Dustypore, Ron; you'll forget all about me when you go back to Australia.'

'No, I won't. There's something about you, living up here amongst all us men. Like—like a nun, and you're not built to be a nun. A passionate nun—that's it, that's what you are. The passionate nun of Dustypore!'

I humoured him. 'Eleanore too, I suppose. Two passionate nuns in Dustypore. The band's going inside; they must be starting to dance already. I'll have to talk to some of the others before I go off to the canteen. . . .' Ron followed me in silence across the lawn, to the other little groups.

'Oh, yes, the canteen dance; we mustn't keep you away from

that,' said the colonel, as I said good-bye to him, duty done, about half an hour later. 'Good of you to come here first, though.' His car was to take me to the canteen. The captain spouse walked along the gravelled path with me towards it. He was thoroughly gloomy.

'You know,' he burst out suddenly, 'we've been in this dump over a month now, and I haven't had a dozen dances with my own wife! And tonight won't help the score.'

'That's Dustypore all over,' I comforted him. 'But you'll soon be gone, and there's a satisfying surplus of women in Britain.'

'It rains too much in Britain. . . .' I couldn't see what that had to do with it, but men have peculiar trains of thought.

The band was playing 'Goodnight, Sweetheart' as we drove out through the gates. 'Sergeant gave me this parcel for you, mam. Sandwiches, he said to tell you.' I was hungry—very hungry. No time for dinner, and my fruit salad abandoned.

'Let's have a picnic. You can stop under this next tree.'

We chewed companionably, share and share alike. The *bashas* on either side of the road were dark and deserted. Faintly the band echoed '. . . tears and partings may make us forlorn . . .'

'There's chicken in there.' The driver was pleased.

I looked at my watch. A quarter to nine—the night was still young. The sergeants were sending their truck for me at 10.15.

There had been eleven women at the cocktail party; there were twenty-nine at the canteen. That left less than a dozen for the sergeants. Dustypore mustered only about ninety odd of the gentle sex and at its very lowest ebb, the male strength never fell below several thousands. All the nurses could not be off-duty at once, some of the wives had infants and there were always the non-starters, unavailable through leave, illness, et cetera.

Tonight the interval between dances was cut to two minutes flat. A miracle of endurance for the besieged twenty-nine, or rather thirty, counting me. 'They don't hardly give you time to clear your spit,' grumbled the saxophone player, wiping his face and neck on his sleeve. He was having a 'two minutes', sitting on the edge of the platform beside the 'Ladies' Enclosure'. 'You going now, mam?'

'One more dance, first.'

So they played 'Goodnight, Sweetheart'. It was my signature tune in Dustypore. How it originated no one had a clue, but all the bands seemed to feel bound to play it whenever Families' Welfare was around. 'Show me the way to go home' would have been more appropriate. They played it now, and

thirty women danced to it with thirty soldiers, while hundreds more looked enviously on and sang the words softly. There were four encores, with different partners.

'A good tune, that.' The sergeant waiting beside the truck opened the cab door and hoisted me up. 'It takes you back.' I felt it would always take me back, wherever I might be, through the years, to heat and noise and dust and sweating lonely men.

'Is the party going well?'

'All merry and bright, mam. We've got eleven ladies. They'll all leave when you do, though.' A gentle hint, which I bore in mind. Six of the eleven were sergeants' wives—homely, pleasant women. The others were W.A.C.(I).

'Could we have "The Grand Old Duke of York"?' I asked the R.S.M. host. Men did not dance together in Dustypore, not even in an attempt at fun or burlesque. But the R.S.M. could see no objection to this kind of dancing. The band said they knew the tune, 'kind of', so we all lined up, spacing the ladies out down the line.

The first couple of sergeants tripped sedately down the centre, holding hands. It was a great success, so we kept on at it for quite a time.

(I described it all to John, and he was incredulous. 'Dustypore! By the Lord Louis, Dustypore! I can't die happy now until I've seen forty tough P.O.s doing the same. Holding hands and waltzing down! They'd die themselves after it!' If I married John, it would be my duty to make sure he could die happy!)

The R.S.M. of the Toughs was there. 'I hear you're going to win the fencing cup,' I chaffed him. 'Is your chap as good as they say?'

'Well, he swears he's forgotten all he ever knew, but he seems anxious to do his best. It may all come back to him.'

'I hope so. He has my best wishes. Very sporting of him to take it on at the last minute like this.'

'I'll tell him, mam,' and the R.S.M. buried his laugh in his beer. I had to laugh, too, remembering Sharkey's agonized 'SWEAT the BEER . . .'

'Goodnight, Sweetheart' once more, and I danced it with the saintly sergeant of the 'skeleton caur'. 'My group goes today three weeks,' he told me joyously.

'Will you go back to the same job?'

'I've got a little greengrocery business. The wife's been running it, but she's tired and fed up with it all. It'll seem funny to be back among fruit and veg.'

'It'll seem funnier when you find out how little fruit and veg. there is.'

'I won't mind, mam. I'll be HOME!' '. . . tears and partings may make us forlorn, but with the dawn a new day is born . . .'

The truck hurtled along through sleeping Dustypore, the headlights pushing the darkness back firmly on either side.

'Makes a change, a guest night. We get sick of the same old faces.'

'But it's the same old faces you have to invite to your guest nights,' I pointed out.

'They're not as old as the ones we have to have every night. Makes a break for the wives, too. I'm glad my wife isn't out here. She's something to look forward to.'

'Wouldn't it be rather nice to think you were going home to her if she were out here?'

'No, mam,' said my sergeant driver, 'it wouldn't. Because I wouldn't be going home tonight. I'd *be* home. She wouldn't let me out to the Mess.' Which was another train of thought altogether.

Two minutes to midnight. I wound up my watch and pushed it under the pillow, then tucked the mosquito net in all round. It had been a long day—eighteen hours almost non-stop. A fairly average day of welfare work in Dustypore. My feet ached. I rubbed them up and down against the cool sheet gratefully.

Anderson and Peg's Dad would be stirring in another hour or two, setting out on their long journey home. Somewhere outside, Private Bertram Ball would be pacing up and down, rendezvousing as per regulations, cursing Families' Welfare for their interference in his affairs. He wouldn't be happy with his W.A.C.(I), though, and India would ruin a weak character like his. Was I doing the right thing, acting like God in other people's lives? No harm would be done; Ball would come out of it healthier and wealthier and with some little prestige in his unit. Sharkey Tate would be fast asleep on his bed-board, clean and no b—— splinters, I hoped. Not so very much harder than this bed of mine. Would he keep his promise and stay sober 'to oblige'? And that quiet man whose handbag lay on my chair, I hoped that he was sleeping soundly too, able to forget. O.C. Signals would be parted from his teeth, chastely resting in the little violet-rimmed bowl. Perhaps he had laughed when he put them in it tonight. Ron Dover—I didn't want to think about him; he always seemed to make me conscious I was a woman and not welfare. My commander—

was he really only waiting for a little encouragement? Four months, seven meetings and piles of letters—that was enough for me, but he would want to be quite sure of his feelings. Married or not, Eleanore and I would have to serve out our contracts: eighteen months or the whole duration. . . .

The voices wakened me. ‘. . . danced with him seven times. He’s a b—— little pimply pipsqueak, and I’d have knocked him down only he’s a half-colonel. I will yet if this goes on. Oh, thank you, Colonel; I’d love to, Colonel.’ The voice went falsetto for a moment. ‘Colonel H—— and Colonel D——!’

‘How dare you swear at me like that! You’re coarse! You can swear like that at your poor soldiers, but don’t you dare . . .’—low sobbing.

‘Did you let him kiss you or did you not? Don’t answer me back, you did! Didn’t you? Answer me at once! A laughing-stock . . .’ it went on.

I climbed wearily out of bed, put on my uniform and went next door. Families’ Welfare walked in where angels feared to tread, because a little help and advice from an onlooker sometimes lifted marriage over sharp-tongued rocks.

Chapter 12

Not a single cloud: the whole sky was hazily blue. The water showed up darkly in the open-air pool and the raft in the centre bobbed crazily as the swimmers clambered on to it or dived off. Huge coloured umbrellas shaded the groups sitting at the tables on the velvet lawns. The romantic East, polished up to make a European playground.

‘Profound, profane or plain provoking?’ John Douglas opened one eye to inquire. ‘What’re you thinking about?’

‘It was just—I was thinking how polished all this is. Everything all beautifully fitted in. Those flower-beds, sunk into the grass like that. Striped petunias, and those little plants like dwarf sweet williams. And the cannas—they’re so showy, banked against those walls. It’s so much like a picture; it doesn’t seem real. If the sea came in over that rampart, it would all vanish.’

‘The sea does come in, often. The monsoon sweeps it right over. Ruins the grass; they have to re-lay it. It makes a real picture, then, not this wishy-washy South-of-France stuff.’

‘Wishy washy, wishy washy,’ Nick chanted. He was sitting on the beach, as close to his idol as he could get, trickling sand

through his fingers on to John's bare chest. Meggie was also busy, pouring buckets of water over his big feet. She ran backwards and forwards between feet and water's edge tirelessly; Meggie, the dark-haired dumpling of the family. Glenda, the fair-haired wisp, was swimming in the shallows, waving to us every so often, as per her mother's warning instructions. 'I find I can keep track of them all if they make signals occasionally,' Isabel had laughed. 'Even Meggie can keep afloat, but there are always so many children at Breach Candy.' Their nurse had had the afternoon off, so John and I had brought the three of them, in an open taxi, to make the outing an 'extra special'. The taxi-driver, a bearded Sikh, had driven at breakneck speed, tooting his bulbous horn frantically, and the children had leaned over the back hood, fascinated by the road flying backwards.

I relaxed in the deck-chair and felt as if John and I were shut in a little world of our own, cut off from all the other people on the tiny, artificial beach. This was my first visit to Breach Candy, the swimming-pool reserved for Europeans only, but I hoped that now the monsoon was really over we should come every time I was on leave. I was a poor swimmer, but that wouldn't matter much here.

'Uncle jumps high—high'n high,' boasted Nick. 'Can Aunt Margret see?'

'Aunt Margret doesn't want to see,' John told him placidly. 'Just you keep on making me into a sand-pie.'

'Can I pat you with my spade then? And Meggie splosh water? You have to splosh water for a *real* pie.' Meggie, diverted, didn't wait for her uncle's consent. She splashed with a full bucket.

'Ahoy there.' John sat up, spluttering, dripping with water and wet sand. 'I won't risk the patting, Nick, my boy. Come on, let's swim.' He hoisted Nick on to his shoulder and galloped off, Nick squealing with joyful apprehension. Glenda and Meggie and I followed slowly, round the edge of the pool. Nick at four was like a little fish in the water; we kept pace with the two bobbing heads, right up to the sea-wall side of the pool. Nick climbed out and dripped his way over to us.

'Uncle's going to jump,' he shouted importantly. 'Look, Aunt Margret. . . .' I looked, at the tall figure outlined for a moment on the highest diving-board, and watched it cleave down through the water. Showing off, at every age!

'Meggie tummin,' and Meggie fell in, confident of arms waiting to catch her. Glenda and Nick floated alongside, on their backs.

'In you come, too,' ordered my commander, and I clambered carefully over the side, every bit as confident as Meggie.

I knew what I wanted, now. I didn't want to be a passionate nun in Dustypore. I wanted to be a passionate wife in Bombay.

Chapter 13

Dustypore seethed.

We had all lived through five days of almost unbearable suspense; hopes and fears; defeats and triumphs. The preliminary heats and knock-outs had been most bitterly contested; the semi-finals were behind us, and tomorrow was the grand finale, the day of the finals. Tomorrow, though the sun should grill them, the troops—British, Indian and Italian—would stand fast until the very last event had been decided. There would be no all-night squatting for the best vantage places—the army would never grant time off to its members for such a purpose—but, to offset this, everything was free.

We were sport dizzy!

Eleanore had come through the ordeal in an odour of untarnishable neutrality. I had blotted my copy-book. The Scottish unit—the only one in Dustypore—had made a gallant stand against the hordes of Sassenachs and I had cheered my countrymen to the echo. Unfortunately, there were many Scottish voices in the nursing ranks, too, and the W.A.C.(I) fancied anything likely to blossom out into a kilt. The Jocks could have dispensed with such dangerous allies. Dustypore was always up in arms against favouritism amongst its female element. 'We'll give 'em black-eyed susies,' it raged, and it did. The adjective described about ninety per cent of the Scottish strength on this, the eve of the finals. On the morning when their R.S.M. stalked on to the parade-ground with the regimental tartan colours—black, yellow and blue—interwoven round his left eye, every other stricken eye in the gaping ranks had closed in sympathetic salute. But there were black-eyed beauties in every other unit, too, by then.

The Military Police, never a tolerant body towards private warring, had an Irish Provost Marshal, neutral against everybody. Prohibition Week was inaugurated especially for the Sports, and the M.P.s confined themselves to enforcing that. Sober men wearied quickly of fighting after first blood had been drawn. No one was 'confined' because of an honourable black eye.

The fencing tournament was the highlight of the whole Sports. The Brigadier, as the instigator and patron, was personally present at the start of the first pair. The fencing heats took place in the open air, in the late afternoons, while the light still held. The B.O.R.s squatted in their thousands on the flat ground so that everyone could see a little something of what was afoot. Their officers could either stand or sit in rows on benches specially provided.

The Brig. made a very short speech, the words shooting out of his mouth like bullets. He sat down. His troops cheered. They had not heard a word of his speech, but when he sat, they could honestly applaud the action.

'Let prodding commence,' whispered Eleanore. 'And have your hanky *out*. You won't have time to fumble for it.'

It had been vaguely understood that the Brig. would sit it out, this first session. After about three minutes, in which his brows had shot up into his hair and come back again times without number, he grew fidgety; at four and a half minutes he looked at his watch ostentatiously, started visibly and whispered to his Staff captain. The pair rose. Dustypore began to rise politely with them, but were motioned to remain at ease. They took their departure."

A fencing expert, a major, had been specially imported from Lahore to act as judge and referee. At first he had been out in front with his charges, circling them warily, ready to strike up their weapons and do all the other knowledgeable things experts go in for. After two minutes he had stopped all movement and just stood, his brows exercising like the Brig.'s, except that he had no hair for boundary purposes and the ripples could continue over his entire scalp. When the great man left, it had seemed as if our expert meant to follow him off the field, but he went no further than the nearest bench. He sat heavily down on it. The whole audience, watching breathlessly, were thrilled and impressed. The padre's class were obviously too good to need any close-up jurisdiction.

'Who,' began the major, his chins and crowns a-quiver, 'trained these—these men?'

'I did.' The padre was modestly ready at his elbow. 'The Brigadier kindly lent me a handbook. Without illustrations.'

'Oh! Oh, I see. Jolly good show, padre. They'—his swallow was almost painful to see—'they're worth watching.'

The two fencers, taking a breather to wipe their brows, were near enough to hear this outspoken praise. They grinned sheepishly and set to, again, uplifted. The prodding went steadily forward. Dustypore looked with affectionate eyes at

the padre, this man who not only knew his carrots but his onions, too.

'If he weren't a padre,' Eleanore confided to me, 'I'd say his tongue has never left his cheek since he opened that handbook of his!'

As the days passed, the judge's decisions began to form into a curious pattern. A monotonous pattern. Eleanore and I, studying the results, noticed it almost at once, and hoped no one else would. Taller man, shorter man, taller man, shorter man, even an inch in height seemed to affect the decision. But only one verdict caused any comment.

The victor had dropped his weapon seven times, but his courteous opponent had waited until he picked it up. Indeed, he had begun to pick it up for him, placing it firmly back in his hands and, at the end, even closing the fingers neatly round the hilt. The buttery-fingered one was the hope of the Royal Engineers and technical advice began to flow from the exasperated audience.

'Rivet it on the b——d,' they roared when the weapon had been replaced for the sixth time. But the Lahore major remained faithful to his yardstick. The little Engineer had triumphed and gone hurriedly off the field with the padre, *en route* for the hospital and Matron. They hoped that she, out of her store of solid common sense, would suggest a remedy for sweaty palms. The R.E. did not expect another miracle.

The B.O.R.s, puzzled, nevertheless accepted the decision. It was understood that there were finer points to this business which were beyond their comprehension. This sport of Brigadiers! A few interested officers, Eleanore and myself, had gathered round the judge for an informal post-mortem.

'His stance and his posture were superior. He scored heavily on those.' The major was bland.

'Yes, but doesn't he need the weapon to go with them? I mean, sir, he couldn't defend himself with just his superior stance and posture?' This was the adjutant of the defeated one's unit, the Military Police. Their entrant had been much fancied. He sprang about the place like a Douglas Fairbanks with St. Vitus's dance and the other units swore that he had been sent to bed for weeks past, rubbed from head to foot with axle grease.

'Oh, if he were defending himself in earnest he would retain his weapon without any doubt. And in any case, an Engineer could be relied upon to have a spanner handy.' That seemed to be unanswerable logic, on the face of it, and Dustypore hardly liked to point out the flaw. The M.P. adjutant persevered

bravely. He had to face an inquiring C.O. shortly, and wanted to have all the facts and findings at his finger-tips.

'What was our lad's main defect, sir? The point which really put him out of the running?' This was a frontal attack, all right. But the major, like the Royal Engineers, could be relied upon to have retaliatory ammunition up his jumper.

'He was never in the same spot for two seconds running. And that sort of thing always delays the proceedings, don't you think?'

'Ye-es,' agreed the Police adjutant, flattened at last. 'I—er—I suppose it does, sir.' But he didn't manage to explain it to the irritated Irishman. 'The old boy tore me off a strip,' he mentioned to Eleanore, and me later. 'He seemed to think the whole point was not to be a static target.'

'It's all for the best.' Eleanore always said the right thing. 'Private Albert Snorterholme wouldn't have looked well on a fencing cup. It's more like an alibi than a policeman's name!'

The B.O.R.s became linguists overnight, to keep up the tone of this classy sport. 'Go on, you joey muggins, give 'im the cup doo tart. Chapter two, verse eleven.' 'Try 'im with a touch of that cur passin' lark, Harry lad. The one the corporal let you get away with, it being Latin!' But mostly they used plainer language.

The general's wife would depart from Dustypore a fencing fan, padre style. She had paid a courtesy visit to the scene, shortly after her arrival on the third day. She had lasted out to the end, and never missed a performance after that. Firmly entrenched between the major and the padre, she held the handbook without illustrations on her lap and plied the two experts with questions. It was known—the general's wife had said so herself to Maria—that the padre and the major had different interpretations of almost every sentence in the book. But the G.W. erred on the side of the padre, and so did Dustypore. 'If it's to be spit or polish, I'd rather have spit,' declared the G.W., and no one cared to carry the matter further. She was majestic in every department, this general's lady, and she could shake like a jelly. At least, she could while she watched the fencing. The Royal Navy might discuss her in terms of tonnage displacement, and the R.A.F. could shake their heads and say, 'Bombers only, and heavy at that,' but if the army couldn't have many, they were willing to settle for much, and they took her straight to their hearts.

On the afternoon when the Scottish champion had advanced to the foray with his arm held branching over his head in the accepted fashion of a Highland dancer, and his opponent,

fearful of losing marks with a less classic début, had come to meet him with his hand stuck straight up, the troops had queried the arrangement with 'You may, Johnnie dear, but don't forget to . . .' The G.W. had shaken. When the Highland one had timed his footwork to the strains of 'Wha saw the 42nd' slow sung by his Scottish supporters, his foe, again worried about marks, had begun to keep his foot hanging loose in the air, not to come down before the beat. The troops had pointed out the nearest one. The G.W. had shaken again. When the bagpipes had started up and the English champion, deafened by the din, had cupped his ear politely and leaned forward to catch what the Scot was telling him, she had shaken. But when the cupped ear was not withdrawn and the Scotch facial contortions had become menacing, the major had stepped forward to lend his own kindly ear. He had even silenced the skirling pipes. Then the Scot had told us all 'Nae tr-rouble at a, sir-r; ma upper plate had slippit a wee thing early on, ye ken. Ah'm jist tellin' yon ba-heid I wisnac speakin' tae him and tae pit forrit his pint and get on wie'd.' It had been too much for the G.W. She had shaken the bench and the padre, seated on it beside her, as well. He had buried his flushed face in his hanky. 'For shame and no wonder,' said some C.O.s whose hopes had been quenched early on.

The 'Ba-heid', a despairing victor, had been borne triumphantly off in his tumbril, back to his diet-sheet and to be watered down for yet another day in this soul-searing arena. The Scot, almost incredulous of his own good fortune, had hared for the fencing tent, yelling like a yahoo. 'Ba-heid' had put his hands over his ears.

There had been a little criticism of the training from disaffected, defeated sources, but the padre had warmly defended himself against all-comers. 'We only got to Chapter 5,' he reminded his critics. 'The speed and action don't come into it until Chapter 12. The lack of illustrations was a great drawback, we found.' He visited all his fencing flock when the sudden return to normal army rations had stretched them out in hospital beds. Matron had the final word and it was apt, as always. 'Men! Feinting and fainting! BAH!'

Private Ball, competing under the system, had fought his way into the final. He was the raging favourite, but he would be beaten on the morrow. It was the little Engineer's turn to win once more, and he would go out on to the sward with a hand newly coated with strong glue. O.C. Royal Engineers had assured O.C. Tough Regiment that a spanner would not be

the decisive factor. 'Who's going to ungum the glue?' Eleanore demanded of the world at large. 'That lad's going to have a sword as well as a spanner handy, after this.'

The padre had decided to award a silver cup for the runner-up, so the Toughs were sure of that. And the troops still did not question the major's placings. They had implicit faith in his system of marking, and a dead silence reigned over the whole field while he added up the columns in his little book, did a bit of subtraction and multiplication on the side and finally announced his findings. John, told of our suspicions, thought that height might not be the sole standard. 'Your major's humorist enough not to despise hair-styles and knock-knees as sidelines.' But none of us ever found out.

'It's a funny kind of sport.' The corporal next door talked about it often. 'It'll never catch on in the army, and that's a fact.' He, too, was a Regular. 'No proper end, just the major clapping his hands.' It didn't usually end then, either, unless one of the fencers actually had his eye on the major. They had ample cause to distrust stray claps and no real faith in their mates, when they implored them to stop—it was all over bar the notebook. Padre-trained and major-judged, they had a hard row to hoe for the honour of their regiments!

'They tried to kill each other in the olden days,' I reminded Batters. 'That was an abrupt ending, too.'

'It's us they're killing now, the way that lot goes on at it. I nearly died laughing myself yesterday. The latest is bets on the sprints. They're like streaks of lightning; you can hardly see them go past.' I looked at him, inquiringly. 'The losers, mam. The major's orders is—Major Dover's orders—a gap has to be left, for them to go straight as the crow flies. To the fencing tent, mam. A clear lane. One of the officers has a stop-watch, soon's the name of the loser is known. Shorty Thompson had to be dragged inside; his heart gave out two jumps from the flaps. The winners——' He paused and rubbed his chin, eyeing me. 'It's such an uncertainty, no one knowing except the major. Both parties is all set to run, hell for leather. The winner gets his hand shook, quick, and then he has to stand with his ears all stretched, listening. The winners——' but the corporal couldn't go on for laughing.

'What's the attraction in the fencing tent?'

'Refreshments, mam.'

'Char or beer? It can't be beer, surely—not this week?'

'Both. And at once. It's all poured ready. At the Brig.'s expense. Half a pint of each does the trick immediate. They've gone all delicate with this purified diet stuff. Their units has

the stretchers all ready. 'The winners——' And he stopped to laugh again.

'*They* don't get refreshments? The padre——' I began, horrified.

'The winners don't get any,' the corporal hastened to add. 'And *that* lays *them* out *proper*!' I remembered the yelling Jock and 'Ba-heid's' face of anguish. 'They say the Brig.'s won championships at it. I'd almost defer my repat. to see him matched up with Baldy Stott.' When his opponent had fallen flat on his face, Baldy Stott the signalman had prodded him to his feet again, with the most tactless of prods at that.

The cross-country run had been decided early in the week. The R.A.M.C. had won that cup. Ball had finished thirty-fifth in a field of over two hundred. Sharkey had covered the distance with him, taking a few short cuts here and there. '... me not being in training. I was thirty-sixth. They wrote down all our names.'

'But you weren't entered at all.'

He shrugged. 'What's the odds? If they don't know who's entered, us runners ain't there to tell them. You have to give your name to an officer when the question is put to you. They asked me, and I've got witnesses to prove it. You can't tell an officer he's pulling off bloomers.'

He came in several times to the office to report progress. A restless little man, he refused to sit down, and prowled about, sniffing appreciatively at the flowers. Indian flowers rarely have any perfume, but I didn't mention it. The pages of the magazines on the shelf at the door whirled through his fingers until some picture or other took his eye.

'That young perisher,' he began one day; 'all the *basha* is prayin' for now is a good night's sleep.'

'You're all over-zealous. You needn't all sit up with him.'

'That young perisher says he has to sleep on his back with his knees up to rest his—to rest. It's the padre's special orders, he tells us, and we're to turn him gently back when he slips over. And not to wake him when we're doing the turning neither.'

'Well, don't bother. If he doesn't know he's slipped, leave him alone.'

'All of us knows. He snores louder than the *basha* strength on his back. The colonel give out special orders: all ranks to co-operate with every stage of training. So he copies that bit out and nails it over his bunk. So's we knows about it. He says if he should wake up on this side of his, he'll have to report the non co-operation to the R.S.M. It being such a set-back to his training.'

I laughed and laughed, while Sharkey scowled. 'I'm sorry, really I am. But I'm delighted. Don't you see, this is the first sign that young peri—that Ball has shown that he's not so dumb after all?'

'Dumb?' Sharkey echoed. 'Him? Try and tell the *basha that*, mam.'

The Jocks had reached a crisis in their sporting affairs, too. A rumour had begun to blow about Dustypore. O.C. W.A.C.(I) called officially on O.C. Jocks.

'This indecency in front of my girls,' she had begun. Her tone had nettled O.C. Jocks.

'You have the answer, madam,' he pointed out stiffly. 'Your girls can boycott the high jump final.'

'So it is true, then! I couldn't believe it; that's why I came round. Ancient Scottish customs!'

'Mabel,' said Colonel McLeod, pleadingly, 'if you can tell me who in Dustypore knows enough about *any* Scottish customs to fly this kite, I'd be grateful.'

Commander Mabel Roff had come straight to my office.

'Hardly the sort of thing for Dustypore,' I had agreed, equally shocked. 'I wish they'd wear their kilts like they do at the Highland Games, I've said *that* several times, but the kilt minus—what a thought!'

'It's going to stay just a thought. The Jocks have got through to the High Jump final in shorts so they'd better stay out of fancy dress now. The other finalist is a Tough! They'll be sending him along dressed in woad!'

Private Ball was regular in his visits. It was understood in the regiment that he had severe family troubles but was training gamely on. They did not grudge him the chance to sit down in a cushioned chair. He didn't get many chances to sit these days; his R.S.M. was against the practice—he thought it developed the wrong muscles for running. Time was short, and I hammered it home remorselessly that divorce was not a good solution. I painted pictures of his future in India. . . . and if you take your demob. out here, you'll never go home again. You'll never save the passage money.'

'I can work my passage if I get fed up.'

'And leave your little girl behind? What if you have children? Will they all work their passages home, too?'

'I can send their fares out,' but his tone lacked conviction.

'Yes, maybe, if you ever earn enough. You'll mess up their lives, too, before you've finished.'

He began to tell me things without being asked. A psychologist would have pieced it all together and known the

answer. I just had to grope. His mother dying when he was a baby and his life with his father and an unmarried aunt, who had kept house for them; his father being one for the ladies, though he did not marry again; growing up, with no friends, rather a cissy sort of boy; his aunt not letting him out to play with other boys of his own age. Jennie's family had moved in next door when he had been thirteen; she had been a jolly little girl of eleven then. Her mother had made the lonely little boy very welcome, and in that house he saw home life as it should be lived. He had always adored and looked up to Jennie. He had wanted to work on a farm amongst animals, but his aunt had overruled him, and she had found the job in the draper's shop for him. Jennie had urged him to make a stand and start looking for a farm job, but he had hung on; he wanted to have a few pounds saved up first, to make him independent. 'You must have met plenty of other girls besides Jennie, in the army, at least?' Yes, but he had always gone back to Jennie.

I did not mention the W.A.C.(I) now. I did not urge him to write to Jennie, either. That must come from him. She was being wisely handled at home; waiting and depending on that unknown welfare officer in far-away India to piece together the broken fragments of her marriage. 'I've always loved him,' she had told our visitor. 'I always will. He's all right really; he just needs someone to keep on telling him what to do.'

I grew anxious as the weeks passed, though everything seemed to be more clear now. Ball had had no colour in his life, no excitement, and he thought India promised both. The counter of the draper's shop was inextricably mixed up in his mind with thoughts of home and, as he did not want the counter, he thought he did not want home, either. I was almost sure he was beginning to see India as drab and sordid for a poverty-stricken white man. But I had to give him something else, something to take the place of India. I sent him along to Eleanore one afternoon.

'It's your job now, Eleanore. Tell him about resettlement schemes, post-war training schemes, agricultural training schemes and emigration chances. That's the real answer: a fresh start in a new country. Show him he need never go behind a counter again.'

She showed him. She succeeded where I had failed. Eleanore knew her job backwards.

Sharkey gave me real hope, the day before the finals.

'He's packing up half his harem again, mam.'

'Which half, this time?'

'He's had nineteen of these welfare interviews, mam,' and Sharkey was grinning.

'Has he said anything definite, though?'

'Near enough. We get talking. Beer keeps your trap shut. It's either talk, think or beer with us chaps. "No divorce," he remarks. Us sitting on the bunks, on the spit-and-polish lark. "I've stood it fifteen years," I replies, encouraging him. "You sweats too much," I goes on. I keep on chipping him about the weather not suiting him, like you said. "You ever been to Canada, Sharkey?" is his next. "Not been exactly, but I've an uncle went out there, years back." "Does he like it? What's he say about it?" This was awkward-like—we've never heard tell of Uncle since. "Well," I replies, cunning, "he won't come back. That's proof enough, ain't it?" "Yep," he agrees and gets out a pamphlet. He lays down on the bunk and starts reading. "What's it say?" I asks him. "Emigration stunt," and he hands me one out, about Australce. It was very well put; they rears sheep out there. I thought it was kangaroos they went in for.'

'They rear both,' I assured him.

'It was that bit when you told him straight she was a—a——' Sharkey hesitated. 'The *basha* tried to tell him, some of us, some of them knowing like from knowledge. But he wouldn't have it, and when Curly Spender told him straight out not to be a asterisk fool, she was a asterisk, he up and had a fight. They landed seventy-two hours apiece. So the *basha* put paid to that lark. But he believed you, mam, and he spoke to Curly. First time for months. Curly ain't one to bear a grudge, but he was careful first go off. When he sees how the land lays, he speaks up plain. Curly knows a lot about her.'

'Sharkey, I haven't mentioned it before to you, but has it been very difficult to—to keep sober?'

'Yep,' said Private Tate.

Private Ball came in after tea. He was leaner and springier, and he almost brought the net curtains in with him.

'R.S.M. says can you make it snappy today, mam? The C.O.'s coming round to wish us luck for tomorrow.'

'I've always made it snappy—as snappy for you as I could manage,' and he grinned. 'I can hardly favour you tomorrow against the other chap, but I'll say a little prayer for you.' And at that he flushed. 'A little prayer that you'll stay sober tomorrow night.' The wet canteens were reopening with limited supplies on Finals Night. 'I can't expect Sharkey to keep it up much longer. The least you can do is look after him

now.' The promised month was more than up. Six weeks all but a day, to be exact.

'Ball was surprised. 'What's Sharkey got to do with it?'

I told him. 'Haven't you noticed he's a non-drinker now? Not at all?'

'To tell you the truth, mam, I've hardly thought about the booze at all, not after the first days. The lads——' And he paused, a little embarrassed.

'You've said it, Private Ball! The lads! All of them! The colonel, the padre, the R.S.M., Sharkey, your *basha* mates—the whole regiment, in fact—have been weighing in on Jennie's side. To get you straightened out. Most of them don't know about her, but they'd have weighed in even more heartily if they had. You've had a lot of good friends, Private Ball. Are you going to start drinking again, and waste all their efforts? Or have you learned to be a man again? Sharkey Tate, sober all these weeks, and just for you. What a pall!'

I waited. A bougainvillea flower dropped off the stem in one of the wall-vases and fluttered to the floor. There were four other flowers there already. I counted them.

'It's all off. It's been all off for over a fortnight. But I didn't want to tell you. I like coming in here. She's—she doesn't believe I can't get a divorce. She says she'll sue me for breach of promise. I'll hear about it through her welfare officer.' Jean Lord, in the deep south! She would take care of her end, all right.

'Oh,' was all I could find to say. I must not laugh now, though I felt like giggling. Instead, I got up and walked round the table and picked up the fallen flowers. It steadied me.

'Can she sue me, mam? Me being a married man already?'

'I hardly know.' Let him sweat over this new angle in his affairs for a bit. 'You certainly carry a load of trouble around with you, Private Ball. Trouble for other people, that is. Families' Welfare won't touch breach of promise, any more than they will divorce. You're out of our hands when it gets to that stage. She'—I almost said your little girl—'will have to make a statement before her Commanding Officer, and you'll have to do the same before yours. Better tell the C.O. straight away, so he'll be prepared.' I would have given a lot to see the tall colonel's face when he heard the result of our sobering efforts. 'He should be pleased with you, after tomorrow. I like the padre's cup better than the Brig.'s, even though it's smaller.'

'I'm out to win tomorrow. The C.O. says the cup is to be a Regimental trophy, and kept with all the others. It's an honour,

mam,' 'I had a quick mental vision of the cup being passed round the Mess, twenty-five years hence. 'Fencing!' 'Yes, by Jove, one of our privates won it, back in the forties, at a place called Dustypore, in India. We don't get chaps like that in the ranks these days . . .' But there would always be chaps like Private Ball.

'I can win, the padre says, if I remember to keep my elbow in and take a firmer stance.'

I knew better. The major might be a humofist, but he would be fair to the end: the Brigadier—that other expert—would be present at the final, but if he had to look, he would try to do it with his eyes closed.

'And Jennie?'

'I put off writing to 'her, mam. I can do it now, though, to tell her about the cup. She'll like that bit.' Jennie would be admiring, Jennie would give this hero his full mead of praise.

'You'd better tell her about the breach of promise, too, when you're about it.' Ball was reluctant. But I was Families' Welfare; I was on his wife's side. Jennie must be armed at all possible points for future emergencies. 'You may or may not get compassionately posted home. This breach-of-promise suit will hold it up. If you don't get home, are we going to have all this over again when some other woman twists you round her little finger? If you lose Jennie, it'll be a bad day's work for you, my lad.'

'It was the baby did it,' said Private Ball simply. 'If Jennie didn't want our baby . . .'

Eleanore and I were going to have a quiet evening, writing letters and pottering about generally, while Dustypore made merry each to his own taste and means, after the Sports were finally over. We were going to dine on my veranda, as a special indulgence to our weariness.

'It couldn't happen anywhere 'else.' Eleanore stretched herself out in her cane chair luxuriously. 'Everything about Dustypore is haywire. That race . . .' and she laughed.

'The one hundred yards?' They had all bent down, touching the ground, ready for the pistol. When it cracked, they had all dashed off, except one chap. He was still bending when the winner had breasted the tape. Excitement had given him cramp, and he couldn't unbend. There had been a few seconds of horrified surprise, then yelling uproar.

'Smack him on the rump!'

'You've had your photo took, chum.'

'What's a pistol to him? Bring up the artillery

'They'll catch you bending, mate! Wot oh!'

His whole unit, officers and men, had gone frantic in their encouragement. He was their last chance of a cup. The general's wife's father had commanded this very regiment when she had been a girl. She used the language her father would have used. The Brigadier sat silent beside her, rubbing his nose so that his fist had covered his mouth. A fitting finale to the Dustypore Sports!

'The Victory Ball will be the next hurroosh. Are you inviting John up for it, Margaret?'

'I don't think so. He'll be the only sailor, and he'll feel embarrassed.'

'If that's the only snag, we can invite other sailors. As a matter of fact, I've thought up rather a good scheme. We'll be short of ladies, as usual, so . . . ' and I listened to Eleanore's scheme.

My romance was still hanging fire. Somehow, in Bombay, I was too shy to do any encouraging; if encouragement was really what was needed. But up here I always felt bolder.

'If you get other sailors, I'll invite him,' I promised Eleanore.

I was almost late for church next morning. It was voluntary church parade, and I was surprised to see Private Ball in the front row. I waited for him outside. You could walk with the B.O.R.s when you were welfare.

'The padre took a lot of trouble,' he began.

'Don't spoil it. Just let me believe you came because you felt like it.'

'I did feel like it, or I wouldn't have, mam.'

'Where's Sharkey? Not up to much this morning, I suppose.'

'No, mam.'

'Give him my regards.'

'He's—he'll be in cells . . . mam.'

He'll be in cells, mam. It was inevitable, of course. I was Families' Welfare, not a School of Temperance teacher. But it was a shock, all the same. So soon.

Ball began to explain. 'We got in with the Jocks. . . . ' Their cells would be full to overflowing this morning, too. It did not matter much what had caused it. Sooner or later. It was sooner, that was all. 'Sharkey gave me his money to keep for him. Before we went out. He knew I wouldn't get drinking, and I promised I wouldn't give him any money. I've still got it all, but the Jocks were treating all us Toughs. Sharkey's well

liked. 'I got him away twice, but he was fighting drunk and he knocked me out and then took on two of their police.'

There was nothing welfare could do for Sharkey. I hailed a passing truck.

I would be in time for elevenses with Matron . . . and the first six fencers had already been admitted.

Chapter 14

'My dear John . . . would you care to come up here to our Victory Ball? I didn't like to ask you before, because I thought you would be the only sailor, but now I hear there's a big crowd coming up from Bombay, several R.I.N. chaps amongst them. I don't know where they're all going to stay yet (this hotel is booked up as usual) but you can have my room and I'll share with Eleanore. It's rather short notice. . . .'

'My dearest Margaret : . . and I've been wondering why you hadn't asked me. I dropped enough broad hints. I'll come, stay the night and see this Dustypore with my own eyes. . . .'

So it had all been fixed. John was actually here in Dustypore to see it with his own eyes. My little C.O. had lent his car, and I had met him at the station and brought him in triumph to the hotel.

'The veranda,' I announced, waving an arm airily around. I was rather proud of it these days, with its blue-and-cream-striped rug, two cane arm-chairs with deep blue cushions, wall vases, a bookcase, a standard lamp and a table-lamp. 'That's the lawn over there, but it's too early yet for the gang to be on it. The bedroom is through the curtains.'

'Just as I pictured it all,' grinned John, gazing round. 'After you, mam,' and he raised the curtain. Barely two steps in and I was swung round, into his arms.

'The window!' I hadn't expected to be kissed in here, and it was open, of course. But not a B.O.R. face was turned in our direction. 'I'm sorry,' I ended helplessly.

'Kissing my girl in an aviary with the British Army looking in through the bars! Where's the R.A.F.? I don't see—'

'They'll be here soon,' I promised him. 'Look, that's Run; he'll be wanting his tea now he knows I'm home.'

John, sitting on the bed, having his hand shaken, laughed and laughed.

'Let's hope he's had the sense to bring several uniforms,' Eleanore remarked, as we dressed in her room later. 'Your

private air force will go all out on white drill. It's a direct challenge!

• 'I warned him where not to stand. Can you do these buttons up for me, now, please?' I had treated myself to a new evening dress; cream slipper satin with a tight little bodice, the skirt falling straight in front and all the fullness sweeping out at the back.

We were ready at last, Eleanore in stiff emerald-green taffeta, and we looked at each other. 'It's Victory Ball for us both,' Eleanore said slowly. 'Next week I'll be meeting Jeff after nearly eight years and tonight you. You *are* going to say yes?'

'If he asks me . . .'

John was waiting, leaning on the veranda rail. There were several white uniforms among the khaki drab on the lawn and more than a few evening gowns. It was nice to hear other women talking and laughing on that lawn. 'It's been an ordeal,' he informed us, 'to stand up here. Can't they really find anywhere else to billet the pair of you?'

'We're unfrocked and beyond the pale and we're beginning to like the sensation we cause,' Eleanore laughed. 'There's my Jock adjutant waiting. We'll join up with you at the Club, then. Don't get lost on the way up there.'

'You haven't got a drink, John—there's a bottle of sherry and some glasses under the bed.' I got up to fetch them, remembered I didn't live here now, and sat down again. 'Would you rather have a *chota* peg? Or gin? I only keep sherry in my wine-cellar, but if you wave, my "boy" will come over.'

John brought out the sherry. 'Not for me, thanks. Eleanore and I never drink anything unless we're spending the evening here, all by ourselves. If you leave any, I'll have some when we get back, though.'

There was an odd little restraint between us, sitting here. The old, humorous camaraderie seemed to have gone; John had an air of alert watchfulness about him, and his eyes never strayed far from the lawn. Who was he interested in over there? I wished fervently I hadn't remembered that window; it was enough to put any man off his stride.

'What's the latest about Jeff?'

'Oh, nothing fresh. He'll be in that hospital in Chundlibaug for weeks yet. Irene Bannister—she's Eleanore's opposite number up there—visits him. She wrote that they're fattening him up by degrees. He only weighs about six stones. He's desperately keen to see Eleanore, but just as desperately keen

that she 'shouldn't see him until he looks what he calls human again. She's only got a week's leave, and four days of it will be spent travelling. I'm carrying on for her here while she's away. Some of our girls had to be invalided home, and one or two are always in hospital, and no more are being sent out here, so there aren't enough of us to act as spares. Eleanore's is a special case, but we're not supposed to ask for more than seventy-two hours' leave at a stretch, until the spring. Nell Laurie got married last week in Karachi, but she had to be content with seventy-two hours.'

'I'm glad you warned me,' John laughed across at me. 'They make it difficult for us to marry into the ranks of Welfare! And, by the way, you've forgotten to tell me why we're sitting here. Can't we go on somewhere else? Where it's a bit more private?'

'The *tonga* will be round in a few minutes. We're dining in my Mess, before we go on to the dance. Oh, and there's your souvenir dance-programme on the bookcase. I've signed for three dances, and Eleanore has given you one, and Matron and Maria and Mabel Roff and Mrs. McLeod (she's Mrs. O.C. Jocks) and a good many of the nurses.'

'Three dances! Three dances after a two-hundred-mile trek and a seat in the public eye! Margaret!'

'I know,' I said soberly. 'I suppose it does seem a bit much, when you've come all this way to take a girl to a dance. But this is the no-woman's-land of Dustypore, and the Victory Ball Committee got down to basic facts. The women are going to be spread out tonight over the entire assembly. Any man can demand to see any lady's programme, and if the same name is written down more than three times, he can appeal to the M.C. for justice. Actually, I was fully sold out before I even invited you up here, and you're dancing with me by courtesy of the Staff captain, Major Dover and Colonel Shoemantle. You're dancing with Eleanore by courtesy of Major Fowler and with Maria by courtesy of—'

'By the Lord Louis,' breathed John, 'this Victory Ball sounds like a naval defeat! The R.I.N. Mess had invites for twenty lads *with* partners and they've nobly brought them, the prettiest girls in Bombay!'

'It's a pity, but they'll know to boycott the next Dustypore Victory Ball. . . .' And we were still laughing about Eleanore's schemes when the *tonga* arrived.

The *tonga* brought us quickly to our feet. Half the lawn was already standing up, staring over.

'No!' said John violently, and sat down with his head in his

hands. The equipage was well worth a second look. Two horses, instead of one, and both nags had little white lacy hats, trimmed with bells, set squarely between their ears. Further refinement, by Dustypore standards, was supplied by the sagging red rubber tyres slung round their middles, to keep the harness from chafing their gaunt ribs. But the item which stole the show was the huge coloured umbrella which the driver triumphantly flourished in place of the usual faded cotton canopy. John was splashing out another glass of sherry for himself, and I reached for it. I needed it. That umbrella belonged normally to O.C. Toughs; it was the only one of the species in Dustypore and he cherished it.

'Memsahib's speshul.' My 'boy' stood beaming on the steps, ready to hand us up into the back seats.

'And you *ordered* it,' accused the distraught mariner, gulping sherry. 'Look at the bo'sun's big white gloves!'

Welfare must never say die! When I climbed up, John had to follow. Dazed, he allowed the crooked handle to be pushed into his fist, the driver whipped up his horses to a funereal jog-trot and we went swaying off. I waved gaily to Eleanore. She was standing up on a chair, and she waved back. John groaned hollowly. The B.O.R.s stared and saluted him smartly, as we passed; his free hand travelled from knee to cap brim almost non-stop.

'Look at me,' I suggested. 'Then you won't have to see them.'

He looked down at me. 'I'm as crazy as Dustypore. What a place! I never believed half you said about it. Holding up a golf umbrella in the moonlight! In front of twenty R.I.N. chaps!' His lips were twitching.

'Close it up, then. We don't need it. You'll be safer if it's out of sight under the seat, anyway. We haven't passed any Toughs yet, but that thing belongs to their C.O. He's fond of it, and they're fond of him.'

'Holding up a *stolen* golf umbrella in the moonlight! In the very teeth of its owner's crew! Margaret Michaelis, you're wonderful! How is it you're still alive? Tell me that!'

I shrugged and moved closer against him. 'I didn't live until I met you,' he whispered in my ear. But I was beginning to have troubles of my own. My 'boy' had neglected no luxury from the comfort angle in his 'speshul'. We had a sheepskin rug underfoot. It had smelt strongly from the very first moment our feet had ruffled it. Now its ancient odours engulfed us. I tried not to breathe too much. 'That room of yours, everything about you, smells like a garden in spring . . .'

and for one shocked moment I had a vision of Aunt Katrine, marching with her bucket out of the front gate, after the milkman's horse had passed by. 'Delay him, talk about the war or the weather—anything, Margaret,' she had urged almost every Sunday morning, 'that animal needs a minute or two to get settled.' Aunt Katrine and John Douglas would take to each other at first sight!

'Does it?' I managed to whisper back.

'Hullo, the bo'sun's getting up steam.' We had turned in and were pounding up the tree-lined drive at a most handsome gallop, the driver standing up to wave his whip like a charioteer. The Mess heard us coming and lined their veranda rails and Lt.-Col. Quinn helped me out.

The Officers' Club was crowded; there had never been so many ladies under its rejoicing roof in all its history.

'The R.A.F. too! With the *second* prettiest girls in Bombay!'

'Well, Eleanore and I were on the Ball Committee. If the sailors were going to bring up partners for us, why shouldn't the airmen?'

'Why shouldn't they?' echoed John. 'Army welfare at work! There's Sheena and her Archie . . .' Sheena Belton, with her page-boy cap of blonde hair, blue-eyed, in a froth of white net, was Dustypore's dream come true. Her Archie's feet took a rest-cure most of the evening and took it in good part.

The Brigadier led Matron on to the floor and the Victory Ball was off; the R.A.M.C. band, the best in Dustypore, were on their mettle; the open-air buffet was set out half-way down the hillside. If anyone staggered coming back up the slope, it would be ample warning to turn back again. My partners' polite conversation went in one ear and out the other, almost without registering. John's eyes met mine across the whole width of the floor.

'You're getting hot,' Ron Dover told me, as we danced together. 'Let's go outside for a bit, to cool off.'

'I'd rather not,' but we were already at a doorway, and he took me firmly by the elbow. But he didn't stay on the veranda, I was piloted down the back steps and across to the Coronation trees. I hung back and he looked down, smiling.

'Just a last stroll under the trees; you owe me that. Did you know my posting is through? Secunderabad in the morning, so this is good-bye.' We were under the trees now, walking right through to the further side, to stand and look down the bare hillside, across to the lights of Dustypore. One or two other couples were strolling about, arm in arm. No naval escorts, I noted, grinning to myself.

'It's good-bye,' repeated Ron. 'I don't come back here for repeat. Not for Australia. You'd be gone by then, anyway. And I don't want to meet you after—you're married.'

The band had stopped and the applause carried, dully. The music began again for the encore. It would be the interval dance, next.

'You don't know it, but I've been looking after you, up here, ever since you came. You're not Eleanore! So, will you kiss me? Good-bye?'

Major Ronald Dover never did anything on a small scale. When he released me, the sky seemed different, darker. 'Lights out, down there in Dustypore. Come on, I'll take you back.'

I went into John's arms for the interval waltz.

'Enjoying all this, Margaret?'

'They'll all hang on to the very end tonight, and there'll be umpteen encores at the last dance. Let's leave just before it—there'll be plenty of *tongas* then, and I want to show you my office on the way back. There won't be time tomorrow.' There might be time, but there would also be an audience tomorrow!

'If you like; it seems a good scheme, escaping the mob.' But he didn't seem so very eager.

The *tonga* horse and its driver were half-asleep, but I didn't mind what the driver saw or thought. Officially, he had his back turned to us. There wasn't another vehicle in sight, either. I laid my head on John's shoulder—he should have all the encouragement a shaky sailor suitor could ask for. After a small pause, his arm came round me, slowly. I settled myself comfortably and tilted my face up for his kiss. I almost shut my eyes, too, in readiness. But nothing happened.

'Margaret——' and then he stopped.

'Yes?' I prompted hopefully. The Senior Service were also the backward service, obviously. 'These—these *tonga* chaps don't understand English. At all.' And after that I had shot my bolt. It was over to him, for action.

The action was unexpected and violent. John pulled me roughly against him, and his hand came under my arm, fondling, gripping, hurting me. I put up with it as long as I could before my own hand closed over his, in a sort of self-defence! I was glad when we passed a police road patrol and I had an excuse to pull apart.

'This is the office block,' I announced, and tapped the dozing driver on the shoulder to make him stop. John helped me over the ditch and unlocked the door.

The moonlight followed us in through the net curtains and I

turned to face him, leaning against the table. Now, surely, I had encouraged him enough and we were alone together. In this little office of ghosts, where I had listened to so much heartbreak and not so very much joy, I should hear the words which would give my own story a happy ending. For a moment the place seemed to fill with the ghosts, eager to listen with me: Big Tam and Dean, Benson and Donter, Saxby and Cameron, Wilson and Dennie and all the others for whom my door had been a gateway to home. My friends the B.O.R.s would wish me well in this great moment.

The light was switched on and I met John's level glance, before he stared round, coolly. . . . Just a shabby little room, with white-washed brick walls, faded flowers in the vases, pathetic curtains and a welfare officer in gleaming satin like a bridal gown, behaving like a husband-hunter! I held on to the table. Something, somewhere, had changed, because that glance was telling me as plainly, more plainly than any words, that Commander John Douglas, R.N., had spotted my little game in good time and wasn't having any! I had been fooling myself, just as Ron Dover had fooled himself, as all lovers can fool themselves, believing what they want to believe. Lady Blaney's sister—that aloof, little person in Bombay—had dwindled up here, in this Dustypore, into a little unpaid welfare widow, who got herself into ridiculous situations, thought a stray kiss meant a proposal of marriage and made herself cheap, inviting love-making in a public *tonga* and in a dark office. For a moment I almost wished Ron Dover would come in so that I could ask him to knock John down, for daring to look at me like this. Instead—'What's in here?' he was asking and walked into the back room.

'Oh, just files and a tap.' I followed him in. 'Closed files.' Was my own closed now, too?

'John, I thought you—aren't you going to kiss me?' It was my very own voice pleading. I heard it plainly, and then, horror struck, I was able to watch the contempt in his face and in the curl of his mouth. Perhaps those ghosts helped me, out of the door, up the little bank, across the ditch and into the back seat, while John switched off the light, locked the door and followed me, but when he sat down beside me, Captain Michaelis was herself again.

'Was it up to your expectations? Like the hotel?' Requisitely detached.

'No.' He lit a cigarette, making a great business of it.

'They must be having plenty of encores at the Club—none of the cars or *tongas* have passed us yet.' I yawned. 'Oh, I

can't come to the station with you tomorrow. Today, rather'—a little laugh here—but everything's laid on. Lester is picking you up.'

'Decent of that chap, your little C.O. Going out of his way to be obliging.'

'I'm very fond of him,' and left it at that.

When the *tonga* stopped at Eleanore's steps we hadn't passed or seen a soul, except for the road patrol, since we left the Club. I would never again give John Douglas a chance to be alone with me. I hardly waited for the *tonga* to stop before I jumped out, but he was quicker. He thrust an arm round me while he fumbled in his pocket for change to pay the driver. He still held on when it had driven off.

'Now,' he said grimly, 'we'll have this out properly. Eleanore won't be home yet, so we'll go up there.'

'This caveman stuff, Commander! There's nothing to have out. What on earth's the matter with you? It's been a lovely evening and I just thought you might like another kiss, to—round it off.'

His arm tightened round me. 'It is a Dustypore custom, then,' he said roughly.

'The offer is withdrawn now.' I was laughing gaily, though I couldn't think what I had to laugh about. 'The Navy's had it tonight.' Peter's R.A.F. slang! 'I'm almost asleep on my feet. Please . . .' His arms fell away.

He was still standing there as I opened Eleanore's door. I blew him a kiss mockingly and slammed the door. I leaned against it and counted twenty. Then another twenty for pride's sake and reopened the door a crack.

'The Navy's here, and it's coming in,' but the Navy was too late, for once. Eleanore and the Jock adjutant had arrived, in a jeep.

'Well? Hurry up and tell me,' she urged, as soon as we were alone.

'Nothing to report. You arrived too soon. If you'll undo my buttons . . .'

'There! Robin said we ought to drive round and give you another hour at least. But you left ages before us and sailors are fast workers as a rule. . . .' Eleanore had been mistaken, too, but I couldn't bear to tell her. Not yet.

He was waiting for us when we went in for breakfast, with a piece of sticking-plaster on his cheek.

'Don't tell us; we can guess,' smiled Eleanore. 'Now, I've got to be early this morning; you won't mind if I hurry and leave you?' But I hurried, too. I was finished first, and

so all three of us left the dining-room together. Eleanore, rather at a loss, shook hands with John and left us in the driveway.

'I'm late, too. I must rush. I hope you've enjoyed everything; I'll have to visit the Toughts today and see if they've got their brolly back.' I held out my hand. 'Good-bye.'

'I want something else back, and I want it back quickly, before I leave. Come over to your room for a minute, Margaret?'

'Some other time. Cheer——'

'Now. I—it can't stand over until next week-end. Last night

I interrupted him quickly. 'Didn't I tell you? I'm not having leave next week-end; Eleanore will be away.' I put my hand on his arm and his hand closed over mine at once. 'Will you promise me something?'

'Anything, Margaret.'

'Don't bother to write any more. We're becoming far too familiar. Cheerio.' I even turned at the back entrance and waved, to show him how casual I could be. Ron would have come pounding after me to argue all the way to the office, if need be. But Ron loved me. If I had encouraged *him* in a *tonga* and taken *him* into a dark office afterwards, *he* wouldn't have returned tamely to Bombay. Or gone to Secunderabad either.

My 'boy' handed me an envelope at lunchtime. 'Commander sahib's salaams, memsahib.'

Eleanore grinned. 'That's what I call love.' I smiled back and put the envelope in my shoulder-bag. I took it to the office and, still unopened, tore it into small pieces and threw the lot in my waste-paper basket. Welfare waste-paper was burned by Corporal Batters personally.

John Douglas had been amusing himself drying a widow's tears and had seen the danger signal. There was no other explanation of his behaviour last night. He had been rather disgusted with the widow's amorous advances, I told myself, flogging my pride. But this morning he had wanted to go back to the old footing of harmless flirtation. Being in love is like riding a seesaw. Up in the heights or down in the depths, but never on an even keel of common sense. I had thought once that I should never forget Peter, but I had. I could forget John Douglas, too, and if I had to keep meeting him at Isabel's, I could carry that off as well. 'It's not fair to keep going out with him,' I would tell her; 'it might raise false hopes.' She wouldn't dream the false hopes belonged to me.

My friends the B.O.R.s had many troubles, even more than usual, to keep me occupied, apart from Eleanore's cases. Their welfare officer was extra patient with them and gave them good advice, wishing every so often that she had someone to tell her what to do for the best.

'Corporal Foster, your wife is very young; she hardly knew you when she married you. Her married loyalty hasn't had time to grow any roots. She's been honest with you and told you; she needn't have and she wouldn't have, if she meant to do it again. She liked the thrill of marriage, obviously, and couldn't wait for you to get home. It wasn't that particular man she wanted. It was *a* man. Nothing turned out quite as she expected, though. And who are you to talk, anyway? I noticed you, though you pulled your hat down. If you and that W.A.C.(I) are just friends, the friendship is far too close, conducted behind a tree. When Commander Roff hears of it, you'll be on the mat in your colonel's office. You're in much the same state of mind as your wife, but have you told her? Have you, Corporal Foster?'

'No-o, mam.'

'And is there anything to tell?'

'Not—not yet, mam.'

'Not *yet*? But you're soldiering on, hoping? Is that it? Cut it out, lad; it never pays. You must have loved Betty, to marry her, and she's not nineteen yet. Our visitor will keep an eye on her at home for you. And my eye's on you out here, as far as possible. Now, are you going to be on your high horse or aren't you? Can you overlook this foolishness? Nothing happened, anyway. She was too frightened, and it's likely she'll stay frightened now.'

'I suppose so, yes. But if Betty tries it on again, I'll—I'll——'

'I'm sure you will, and don't you try it on again, either. Take my advice and don't do the heavy husband stuff with Betty. If you write proper love-letters to a girl that age, it'll keep her going without practical experimenting. If you're stumped with your letters, bring them in here and I'll lend a hand. . . .'

Archibald Bold had got his wish; it hadn't taken very long either. He wouldn't let me read Alice's letters after a few weeks, just kept me up to date about current affairs in the household for his replies. Nowadays he composed his own letters, but he had brought in the latest group photo to show me. Andy was standing on his fallen arches, with his head on his Mum's shoulder, and Daisy had no sign of bald patches.

'What about William?' I had asked. 'Did he perform?' 'No,' grinned Private Bold. 'At least, if he did, Alice has more to write about now than things like that.'

And then Sergeant Jones. 'Sergeant Jones, you're a fool. Why did you have to tell your wife? She won't trust you with the pretty girl behind the tobacconist's counter after this.'

'I had to get it off me chest, like.'

'Off your chest and on to hers! She can get a divorce, you know, and our visitor will have a job with her, pointing out all the disadvantages of that and the advantages of hanging on to you. Now, I suggest that you sit down and write again and make a case for yourself. Tell your wife that you got drunk because you were longing for her so much, and then you got into bad company before you realized it and then, again thinking of her, you were tempted. Say it wasn't worth it, say—oh, I'll draft it for you, and then you put it into your own style of writing. Have there been any times when you didn't confess, Sergeant Jones?'

'No, mam.'

'I thought not. This urge to unburden oneself can be a great discomfort to other people. Anyway, get that letter off at once. Your wife may not be feeling quite so pugnacious now.'

'I'm a strict teetotaler, mam.'

'Splendid! But cold-blooded sobriety will make this worse. You'll have to break the pledge for this once. Sergeant Jones, you've hurt your wife badly; stung her pride. I don't suppose you'd know this other woman again if you met her, either.'

'Her face, you mean, mam? Well, I can't rightly say; it was dark like. But Bella wouldn't want a description?'

'What I mean is, Bella will never believe that you haven't a clue as to what this other woman looks like. She will honestly believe that you've spent every moment out East chasing beautiful rivals to the surrender point, while she scrubs and slaves for your five children at home. You've got to make it easy for her to forgive you. Knowing you and your pay, she can believe that you're not perpetually drunk, anyway. Sell her the idea that your longing for her was so intolerable one lonely night that you threw overboard lifelong principles, and you're not used to strong drink, so trouble followed. Tell her you're bitterly ashamed, but that you owned up about it at once, hoping she'd understand. Doesn't she ever feel the same about you, without exactly throwing anything overboard? She'll accept that—most women would. She'll have to overlook it, anyway; she'll realize that when she cools down. She won't fancy bringing up five children on her own. But you're

never likely to hear the end of this, I warn you, now. And you'd better start writing her every day—pleading letters—for the next month, at least. Self-restraint comes cheaper in the end, Sergeant Jones.'

'An' that's a fac', mam,' agreed Sergeant Jones, honest and miserable. 'I wouldn't want to go through all this 'ere again. Not even if I was sufferin' like what I have to tell Bella.'

So it went on, day after day. Pitting one's wits against naughty little grown-up boys and dirty little grown-up boys; using one's wits to help the hurt little grown-up boys and the pathetic little grown-up boys. Different types of men and always the age-old trouble. And often I wished that the London instructress could listen to her most unpromising pupil, now so requisitely detached, so impersonal, almost clinical, but never impulsive, conforming to Army discipline and getting results by orthodox methods only.

Eleanore came back from Chundlibaug, rather quieter and never again to be quite the same Eleanore.

'Jeff looks terrible, Margaret. They all look terrible. Except for their heads on the pillows, you'd think their beds were made with no one in them. We just can't get married yet; Jeff won't hear of it. So we've fixed the date for January. I won't be able to go up there again until after Christmas—that's when my transfer will be through. What's the latest from your home front?'

'Oh, nothing at all,' I told her, speaking the exact truth. 'I'm going to Government House next week-end. Their Excellencies are having a cocktail party, and I'm invited.'

'Give them a pep talk on welfare. Her Excellency is terribly interested in our work, I read somewhere.'

I went down to Bombay by truck, to cut out the embarrassment of meeting trains. 'It's quicker and saves me my train fare,' I explained to Isabel and Charles. 'And just look at these Indian glass bangles! We stopped in a village, and I bought them, a hundred for a rupee! The driver bought a hundred, too. Says that will settle his Christmas shopping for the next ten years.'

'It's the G.H. C.P. tonight,' Isabel reminded me. 'You've cut it rather fine, with only half an hour to bath and change. Get moving, Margaret. We go in the special entrance-gate like dyed-in-the-purple snobs, but John said he'd join us inside. What are you wearing. . . ?'

I wore the cream slipper satin. It was a cocktail party, but most of the guests would be going on to dine and dance at hotel or club, and evening dress was quite correct. Everything

the same as on that other evening in Dustypore, but tonight I had no dreams—just a collar-stud John had left on the bedroom floor and which I carried around now, to stiffen pride and morale. I told myself I carried it around for that.

Lawns like dark green plush, lights like coloured stars, uniforms with breastplates of medals, glistening dresses and sparkling *saris* and nothing important until John Douglas brought everything to life for me with his, 'Hello, Margaret, still lapping up the sherry?' and adding in my ear, 'from a different wine-cellar, I hope.' He meant to resume his old teasing manner in front of my sister, then. I played up, gladly.

'By the gallon,' I assured him. 'This is free, so what does the source matter?'

'I'll show her the view over the sea,' he told Isabel and Charles, and drew my hand through his arm. For the past two weeks I had thought of little else but this man, picking over the threads of our relationship, critically and with more than a little self-contempt. Whatever I thought I had read in his voice, his looks and his manner, his actions had never been familiar, until that afternoon in Dustypore. I *was* a different personality up there, completely different, and he had reacted at once. But he wouldn't come to Dustypore again, and this was Bombay.

We strolled across the lawns to the point which jutted out into the sea. He spread out his hanky, and I sat down on a ledge of the anti-aircraft gun emplacements. Sunset, with every colour of the rainbow brought into play against a fading skyline and the sea gleaming at our feet. Always sunset or moonlight in this romantic, heartbreaking, treacherous East.

'That band is rather good. They were terrific at the "God Save"'. Pulling all the notes up as if they were on elastic and then letting them go PLOP! The Indian Police Band, Charles told me.' We had passed the bandsmen, sitting with a beaming sheen on their dark faces, blue-and-yellow-striped turbans rolled up into points on top. But the band seemed to be striking John Douglas as just another unnecessary noise. He stood in front of me, looking down at me.

'You're very lovely tonight, Margaret. You look—like a young goddess in that dress. I shall always love you.' Young goddesses don't gape. I shut my mouth with a snap. 'Why didn't you answer my letter?'

'I didn't even read it; I tore it up.' Corporal Batters had been upset when I had dashed out, to demand the return of 'welfare waste-paper', that afternoon. He had been tending his little bonfire in a ruined-looking bucket. 'You can't tell whether

from which now,' he had mourned, on his knees sifting the frail scraps. 'Was it important, mam?' 'I don't know; that's why I wanted it back,' I had explained.

'You weren't interested?' John demanded fiercely. 'You don't want to know what was in it?' He was obviously going to tell me now, so I could afford to shrug carelessly. 'I told you that I didn't believe my own eyes, that I loved you and wanted to marry you, and if you cared about me at all, would you phone or write. To tell me I needn't believe. You can't go dashing about the place here to avoid me, so I'll ask you again. Are you going to marry me or not?'

The rainbow tints went round in a madly whirling catherine wheel, but it was still a quiet welfare voice which inquired, 'What is it you don't want to believe?'

He stuck his foot up on the rock beside me and leaned his elbow on his bent knee, so that he was almost on a level with my eyes. 'Why did you kiss that other chap? And let him kiss you?'

'I've never kissed——' I began indignantly and then remembered. Major Ronald Dover, of course. It was always Major Ronald Dover. Australia and trouble had the same meaning in my life, nowadays. 'I suppose you mean Major Dover? Were you watching me—us? I did notice a few couples.' Not a naval officer amongst them, though.

'I came out to look for you. The next dance was mine, one of my *three*, and I was anxious to have my full pennyworth. It was dark, but I'd know you anywhere, and I had no idea you wanted to be left alone. You held up your face and he—took you. I was going to interfere, but you didn't seem to be objecting. I hardly knew what to think. Then you came into my arms as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. It sickened me. In that *tonga* I thought I'd teach you a lesson, but I got the lesson. You're so soft I——and I was wild with jealousy already. I could hardly keep my hands off you in that office of yours, standing there asking me if I didn't want to kiss you. I wouldn't have stopped at kissing that night. I'd have——' He paused and straightened himself. 'People are beginning to stroll up here. Yes or no, Margaret?'

'But if you think I go around kissing every casual dance-partner, you can't want to risk marrying me?'

'I'll risk it. There'll be no more of that when we're married. You'll have your hands full with me.' He looked as if he could be a handful, without much trying. 'Let's stick to the point, though. This Major Dover, is he—anyone special?'

'Ron Dover came into my bedroom the very first night I arrived in Dustypore.' John looked as if I had punched him.

'I sent him out double quick. At least, I didn't—he had to stay for an embarrassing half-hour until the men in the next rooms had gone to bed. They arrived home before he could get out. He apologized, and ever since he has been what he calls keeping the rest of Dustypore at bay, on the theory that I was his special property. He even asked me to marry him. When I told him weeks ago that I was in love with you, he asked for a posting. He went off to Secunderabad the morning after the ball, and when you saw us, we were saying good-bye and he had asked for a watchdog's reward.'

'Two weeks of hell,' John said slowly. 'Why couldn't you have told me all this before?'

'I didn't know you were behind us. You looked so "Unhand me, woman"-ish in my office, I couldn't bear it.'

'There's too many people at these cocktail parties, and they're all heading this way. I never thought I'd be so madly in love I'd be willing to go down on my knees amongst anti-aircraft guns. Will you marry me, in a matter of weeks? Just a plain seamanlike "Aye aye, sir".'

Men were all the same; unsure and suppliant, sure and bossy.

'I'm an army captain,' I reminded him. 'Yessir. Straight away, sir.'

'I can't kiss you—YET! But I'm going to look at you—HARD! Pinch me, sweetheart. I can't believe this isn't just another of my pipe dreams. . . .'

Chapter 15

Christmas and Dustypore! What a combination!

By day the sun blazed down, and we longed for the cooler breezes of the night. Dust lay everywhere, the earth baked to a queer, reddish-khaki tone. The water carts trundled endlessly round the roads and the spray burst furiously into sparkling drops, which rolled themselves into mud-covered globules and vanished, leaving a faint steam. Each truck and jeep and bullock-cart trailed a thick, high wall of dust behind it, and particles of dust seemed to hang lazily in the glare; those particles too tired to follow one vehicle, but waiting drearily for the next. The wild donkeys rolled in it, kicked it up with their heels, and their shaggy sides were khaki-piebald where the sweat made paste of the dust.

Each camp had squads of toiling B.O.R. gardeners, sworn to preserve a fringe of green grass and some leggy flowers round

their front-door steps at least. Fathers in the Families' Quarters planted vegetable seeds in neat rows in their small garden-plots and shook sad heads over what came up. And over all, wherever it could find a foothold, climbed the brilliant scarlet and purple and orange flowers of the bougainvillea.

'I hates the very sight of the stuff,' Corporal Batters would confide. 'Catch me growing rambler roses when I get home!'

Dustypore had shed a lot of its austerity as the months slid by. There were fest- and reading-rooms, furnished with low cane arm-chairs plus cushions, cotton floor-rugs and even small tables with ashtrays. But the B.O.R.s did not want to enjoy home comforts in Dustypore; they wanted to go home, whether it would be comfortable there or not.

'Why don't they get on with the "repat?" they growled. 'Speed the repat. That's all.'

My office, too, had changed. The new carpet already had a faded track across the centre, worn by the boots which tramped endlessly in and out. The Royal Engineers had fitted up an electric kettle and a desk lamp. Two plump arm-chairs stood ready to welcome unofficial callers. There were many of these now: padres, officers and B.O.R.s all came in for a minute to take the weight off their feet, as they put it. 'Just like home, this,' they would sigh, sitting gratefully down, and I laughed to myself. Few places could be less like the average British home than this little welfare office.

'My missus would indent for an aspidistra,' Bombardier Thorn assured me.

'Do they still breed them at home?'

'Birmingham's lousy with 'em! Every house down our street's got one in their front window. We don't live with our'n, though; we uses the kitchen.' His laugh was tolerant. 'I wrote in that prefab. book "All present and correct, but what a dump, no aspidistra!" Sarge tore the page out. "You stick to the essentials," he told me, rough like. "The Brig. only wants to hear about the essentials. And *improvements*. It's a shame your wives can't cast an eye over this 'ere book. Black satin suspenders to hold up the pictures! A shower in the bathroom special for ma-in-laws! My face cast in brass for a door-knocker!" A bit touchy about that book, Sarge is; he won't let you write in it now until you spells it out first.'

'He may not be so lucky as you,' I pointed out. 'He may have to live with his'n. I mean, his aspidistra.'

'What a hope he's got!' and the bombardier winked at me. 'But if they puts one in that prefab. he'd have to dust and water it too.'

If Distypore was short of the amenities common to most other Indian military stations, at least we were sometimes singled out for peculiar distinctions. We owned the only Prefabricated House in the whole area of India Command. It had sprung up in our midst, almost overnight, to prove to the sceptical warriors of the 14th Army, in particular, that they weren't quite forgotten men. Houses like this would be available to men like them, back in post-war Britain. The B.O.R.s called it 'The Mush Room' right from the very start. The sergeant in charge had been no willing volunteer for his key position, but he had counted on at least a few breathing spells, when he could relax in the biggest arm-chair and put his feet on the mantelpiece. The B.O.R.s read the neat notice on the door-post. 'The sergeant I/C will answer all questions. All ranks are cordially invited to sign the Visitors' Book and record their helpful suggestions in the column provided.' One and all, they crossed the threshold, licking their lips and with helpful gleams in their eyes. In their present sphere of employment they were rarely asked for personal opinions. The book was chained to the dining-table leg, and after the first few pages had been filled up, so was the sergeant I/C, whenever his duties permitted.

'Keep it clean, lads,' he would implore. 'The Brig.'ll have my stripes off for some of this stuff. Who wrote this bit about wanting a *hoori* to practise on? What kind of an instrument's that? This ain't the Albert Hall—not while I'm in charge, it ain't. . . .'

The Mush Room had been furnished tastefully throughout with carpets, curtains, mirrors, furniture and china. The beds had super-sprung mattresses. Within an hour of the formal opening the beds had been cordoned off. The troops were doing no actual damage, but the sergeant I/C could not stand the bouncing. Every B.O.R. sat down and bounced, in the passing, to see which regimen would have the honour of hitting the ceiling first. The kitchen was equipped to the very last detail: electric washer, cooker—every modern appliance was there, but nothing worked. Except the sergeant I/C, explaining to his exasperated viewers why nothing did.

It was the plumbing system which brought the house down, in almost every way. The Royal Engineers had put their heads together over this popular feature. The prefab. was their baby for maintenance purposes, and the newly laid-out garden needed constant watering, to get the grass and plants under way. Why not let the B.O.R.s do the watering, in a tactful manner, without fatigue squads recruited from R.E. strength?

It was a good idea, really. The troops would experiment with that plug, in the smallest room, with or without water laid on. No 'Hands Off' notice would restrain them, and it was a shocking waste of man-power. Lay on plenty of water, let it flush out through a pipe in the outer wall and it would trickle over the planned lawns and flower-beds. The roof of the Mush Room became a huge, shallow cistern, fed by a pipe running up the wall with a tap at the top. The sergeant pelted up a ladder a hundred times daily, to turn the tap on and off, as the need arose. The troops co-operated nobly; they queued right down the front path and along the main road, just for the pleasure of a civilized 'yank'. The water gushed out of the wall non-stop. The R.E.s beamed.

It was the sergeant I/C who complained first, about the mud the B.O.R.s were bringing in on their boots on to his carpets. The electric sweeper didn't work, either. Duck-boards were laid down all round the premises and along the front path. But the damage had been done; the gushing water had washed away the thin layer of top soil, the hard rock came to the surface and the Mush Room stood marooned in a network of pools. Mosquitoes bred there rapidly, and when the first goldfish, imported from Bombay, was found in the largest pond, authority had to step in. The R.E. fatigue squads shovelled tons of earth from one side of Dustypore to the other, and the garden was relaid. The waste-pipe was linked up with other little pipes, in an intricate irrigation scheme.

'This time only every tenth man to pull the chain,' the sergeant was instructed. 'Who's to stand and count them?' he wanted to know, though he knew well enough already. An even-tempered man normally, he began to speak sharply to his patrons, and got the retort courteous in due course. A whisper ran round Dustypore, but it was enough. The free man-power cut itself off at source. The little spears of green grass turned brown, parched, in a matter of hours.

'Pull it, some of you, can't you?' implored the sergeant I/C, and did it himself, to demonstrate and encourage. But the troops boycotted the little room. The sergeant I/C knew his duty. Each evening, when the last viewer had left the premises and the front door was closed, he began to pull himself—eighty times or so—to empty the roof cistern. His orders stated clearly 'Roof cistern to be kept full during daylight hours. Roof cistern to be cleared and remain clear overnight.' His nightly session became a greater attraction than the cinema. It lasted two hours. Sometimes his listening fans helped him vocally. 'Down! Release!' and groaned. Sometimes

they sang to him about there being no place like home or rolled out the barrel with special reference to his immediate labours. But on the tenth evening, when the undaunted sergeant I/C came down the garden path, jangling his keys defiantly, they began to cheer him. The boycott was lifted. And then another whisper went the rounds of Dustypore.

Eleanore heard it first. 'We're getting new quarters, Margaret. Did you know?'

'No! Where? Can we move in now? ' I mean, if they let us move now we can enjoy it for a week or two before we go?' Like Eleanore, my wedding was fixed for January, and I confidently expected to be posted to Bombay.

'We can move in today if you like.'

'Where? Maria's been hinting, but I took no notice. I'm not going to board with her. It isn't with her, is it?'

'We can take over the Mush Room.'

I felt quite faint. 'The Mush Room! Is the sergeant leaving?'

'No, but the place needs a lived-in air. You know, some washing on the Siegfried Line every Monday morning. No one wants to come home to a sergeant, if you get the idea? The very thought puts the B.O.R.s off prefabs.' Eleanore looked quite serious, but surely she wasn't really keen on the idea? 'Sergeant Dearman's a splendid housewife—no one denies that; he could patent that breath of his, the way his windows and mirrors sparkle. He's made it into a museum-piece, though. The Engineers say they'll lay on electricity, and I suppose we can buy an apron each in the bazaar.' Eleanore paused impressively. 'And welfare would be the first to hit the ceiling! Or perhaps the Royal Navy! John wants to come up here again, doesn't he?' The Royal Navy would hit the ceiling all right, when it heard about this. Like the State Apartments in Windsor Castle on a Bank Holiday, complete with ropes, if not dust-sheets.

'Are you very keen, really, on making a move out of here?' I asked, sort of sounding her. 'We're used to this hotel, and we've got bolts and everything now. The sergeant took all the inside doors out of the Mush Room, so the B.O.R.s could see inside the rooms without going in. I'm rather untidy . . .' I recalled the lay-out of the prefab. The novelty of it had worn thin in Dustypore, and the troops only went in there now to help water the garden. But at least a hundred of them had to sign the 'Pull sheet' before the sergeant could hoist his 'no more, thank you' signal flag on the roof. One hundred daily, in and out! 'I'll never set foot in one of these prefabs again,' he had assured me earnestly—'not after I'm shot of this one.'

'You're the senior welfare officer, Margaret. If you go, I'll have to follow on.'

'I'm *not* going, then. They can't force us to join a Madame Tussaud's before we're dead,' I said, and at that she burst out laughing.

'If you *had* liked the idea, I'd have gone along as chaperone. But not without a solid wall of Commandos as a screening hedge all round. Honestly, Margaret, they all thought it a brainwave! Did you ever hear such a soft idea? They're all going crackers up here,' and then the laugh died out of her face. 'I shouldn't have said that. Sorry, Margo; I'd forgotten about Private Todd. . . .'

Private Todd, that fair-haired, eager-faced lad of twenty-two.

'They took him away to Poona yesterday,' I told her, slowly.

Private Todd. Why do some men have to love their women so utterly, so madly? Mrs. Todd had been living with negro seamen in Liverpool. She liked living with negro seamen in Liverpool; she had told him so, brutally, callously, while he waited the last few weeks in Dustypore, spending his time and his money stuffing his kit-bag with every oddment he had thought she might fancy. Desperate, he had asked Families' Welfare to plead with her until he could get home to talk things over. He had been so confident that whatever had gone wrong, he could put it right and oust those negro seamen. But his wife would have none of it. 'I've kep' 'im sweet with letters overseas, but he ain't comin' 'ome 'ere, botherin' of me. I've a taste for men, not kids like 'im no more.' It was final. No use telling him he was better off without her, useless to tell a man anything like that when he loves a woman and wants her. His padre had tried, his C.O. had tried, his *basha* had tried and I had tried. But only time can teach a man that bitter lesson, and young Private Todd gave time no chance.

'So she don't want me?' He had faced me across the table, taut, staring with tortured eyes. 'So she means what she says here?' He had brought in her last letter. I had read it and been ashamed of my sex. 'She won't be there when I—get home. . . .'

'She may change her mind, lad, even yet. When she sees you again. When you go home, back in Britain, you'll change your mind—you won't want her. Just bear up now, lad; it'll all be so different when once you're home. . . .'

He wasn't really listening to me but I went on: 'You're not giving yourself a chance——' but he had swung away, to lean against the door-post, seeing God knows what pictures through the net

curtains. I would have given much to have had the handling of Mrs. Todd in my office; not to persuade her to take him back, but to persuade him she wasn't worth having back.

'Mornin', mam.' Gunner Edwards had pushed the curtain aside, glanced at the leaning figure and backed hastily out again. 'C——!' I heard him mutter, and his boots screeched on the stone as he turned.

Private Todd came back to face me, but he was no longer Private Todd. I had known even before he had begun to laugh. Idiotic, dribbling laughter. I had stared back at him over the table when he had begun to growl and bare his teeth. I had tried to coax him up when he had gone down on all fours, to crawl lopsided about the floor. But then his snarling had brought the corporal and Gunner Edwards in at the double. They had not managed to get him upright again either, and he had bitten through one of Edwards's hands to the bone. He had backed under my table and defied two officers and seven B.O.R.s, who had hesitated, not because they were frightened, but because they did not want to have to hurt him too much. Batters had settled it. Standing in the doorway, he had snapped his fingers and called, 'Good boy, good boy,' and Private Todd had crawled out under the net curtains, fawning and cringing and licking gratefully at the gentle hands which patted him in pity.

'He's almost hopelessly insane,' his colonel had come in to tell me. 'Doc thinks he might have run amok at home and killed his wife. This way, he's the only sufferer; he hasn't injured anyone.' Gunner Edwards had reported himself as bitten by a mad dog, and was now undergoing the painful rabies injections, without fuss.

'You'll send Todd home?'

'Not yet. He'll be kept out here for observation and treatment first. But he'll have to be taken care of for the rest of his life, I should say.' For the rest of his life. That eager boy of only twenty-two. He was a good soldier. A Regular.' The C.O. had punched away at my carpet with his cane. 'Keep up morale! Organize sports! Keep the lads happy until repatriation! Why don't they talk to these women at home? The lads are all right; all they want is decent home mail. This heat cracks a chap when he's down. . . .'

The very sky itself had a blistered, tortured look, that Christmas in Dustypore.

The closed case-files lay stacked in heaps in the small back room; hundreds upon hundreds of them. Drab little stories;

passionate little stories; sordid little stories; stories of betrayal, of lust, of dreams shattered, of death and bereavement, of sickness and birth, of poverty, of prison, of great courage and greater despair, of ignorance and hope, of childhood crushed and tainted, of hearts and homes for ever broken. Fiction is tame, stale, confronted with the contents of army welfare files in wartime.

Sometimes, as I flicked a duster over them, a name would catch my eye. I would stop for a moment and let memory bring the owner of that name striding once more through the curtains.

Gunner Short with the very jolly laugh; he had not laughed on his first visit. His childless wife had undergone a major operation, but compassionate home posting had been refused. Not that he had made any fuss about getting sent home. 'If only she were up and about again. I don't mind waiting for my group.' Just a few months more and I'll take her on a second honeymoon, I will. Her and me's alone—not a relative in the world. It makes you anxious.' When his smiling C.O. had read out the report of his wife's recovery, with the added news that she was safely convalescent in one of our seaside homes, Short had dashed round to tell me, forgetting that I had seen the report first! I had heard that jolly laugh, then. 'Lil's little and plumpish. A good armful you could call her, mam. I used to chaff her she was always at the sink or the stove. I used to come along up behind her sudden like and give her a slap on the bottom. Just loving like. She'd jump round smart and tell me, "Will Short, don't you dare do such a vulgar thing again. . . ." I will, though, please God. Only a few months more,' and his deep laugh had rung round the walls. Coarse? Maybe. Men are coarse. But they are the gentler sex!

'... sometimes I wonder if there's something coarse and unfeminine about me,' I wrote to Aunt Katrine. 'They're all so outspoken in my office. John seems to see a different me altogether in Bombay; he thinks I'm shy. The B.O.R.s don't have that idea. Perhaps it's as well to be regarded as helpful welfare, and not a helpless woman. They bring everything in here and expect me to know the answers on the spot. I just say to myself, now, if I were his wife or his girl, what would I like him to do or not to do? . . .'

There was the file which always slipped over the edge when I was dusting. The Commando's file. One word in red ink had closed the file, but the tragedy would go on until death filed away two other figures in his dustier records. The Commando had gone already, first. He had walked into the lake quietly, hopelessly, in that enchanted hour of an Indian night

when the dusk is deepening and the moon glows waiting, below the horizon. The Commando camp lay on the wooded side of the lake. He had strolled round its rim, to the flats where rank grass and stones and stunted trees stretched desolate. He had stood awhile silent, and fireflies had danced in jerky agitation just out of reach. He had made sudden lunges at them (or at Fate?) with his fist and the circle broke, to re-form in its aimless jiggling seconds later. We knew, because there had been a witness of his last hour on earth. A small Indian boy had driven his three slaty grey buffaloes into the water a short distance away. The Commando had watched them lumber heavily in, to stand with vast heads resting on the thick treacly surface. The *chokra* had said 'Salaam, sahib' politely, and the sahib had beckoned him to come close, to give him *baksheesh*. Much *baksheesh*—four rupees and seven annas. The *chokra* had tied it all carefully into the tail of his ragged garment and the sahib had smiled and patted his head. The boy had driven his three charges out again, along the stony track, and then abandoned them. He had crept, to sit silent, waiting, to be there to call another salaam to the generous sahib when he should walk back round the lake. But the sahib had gone down on his knees strangely for a long time, and when he rose up he had walked down to the lake edge, across the cracked earth where the water-line had receded, sucked up by the blistering sun. He had not stopped even then, but had gone on into the water. The *chokra* had called out shrilly his salaams, and the sahib had hesitated, then waved and waded on, deeper, more heavily as the mud had sucked hard. The boy had gone back to his buffaloes, satisfied. If the sahib had been too tired to walk to that other shore, he would surely reach it safely, swimming, for the sahibs at that far camp were madder than all the other sahibs. Salaam, sahib! *Salut*, Commando!

His file always brought thoughts of Clandon and Mrs. Macdonald, Aunt Katrine's bosom friend and crony. Mrs. Macdonald thought kindly of everybody, even Herr Hitler. 'Puir mannie, puir mannie,' she had said once. 'Fancy being sorry for him! He's the world's largest-scale murderer! I wouldn't waste any kind thoughts on him,' I had told her, indignantly. 'Ye s'ud, then, Margaret. Wi' God and a' thae ithers waitin' tae speir at him, wis it worth it. . . .' The Commando, too, would be waiting, on that far shore he had safely reached, to 'speir' of his faithless wife and his twin brother, if they thought it had been worth it, after all.

Dustypore was fast teaching me to reserve judgment on all things concerning the human heart.

'Morning, Margaret.' Captain Hardcastle stood smiling in the doorway. He was the latest of the succession of 'marking timers before repat.' The young lieutenant of my early days had gone home long since, and his chair had been filled and refilled and refilled again. But Corporal Batters was constant, if his officers were not, and the welfare of the camp ran smoothly enough.

'Your pictures have come at last. All framed and ready to hang. Bring them in, Corporal.' I coveted pictures for the office walls, as a finishing touch. I could have bought some, but Welfare, Amenities, Troops, For, had long promised to send a consignment, to decorate every Mess and canteen.

'Venice, Bridge of Sighs,' intoned the corporal. 'London, Houses of Parliament.'

'Oh! I'd rather have had Highland cattle than those! Did Delhi send only these two?'

'Twelve dozen at one fell blow,' grinned the captain. 'But these are the most suitable for this shrine.'

'How do I know that? I demand to see the others.'

'I thought you would. You never know when you're well off. Corporal, bring in the others, by instalments.' I went down on my knees on the carpet as the pictures were dumped. 'Pick your favourites; I'll shut my eyes while you give them the once-over, if you don't mind,' and the captain sat down, closed his eyes and began to sing softly 'The Camels are coming, hoorah, hoorah. . . .'

The camels had come to Dustypore! Every picture was of camels—camels in every possible and impossible position, at all times of the day and night, four-square on incredible sands and outlined against unbelievable sunsets. 'Well'—I was breathless—'I wouldn't have believed it.'

'No? The Camel Corps must feel bereaved men. That lot on the walls should send the wine-bills up in every Mess. But the best is yet to come. The other two, Corporal?'

Batters hesitated visibly, then said woodenly, 'Yessir.'

'That chap's got a nice mind.' The captain was approving. 'Forgets that what's a thrill to him and me is commonplace to you.' The other two were wrapped in newspaper.

'Well!' I sat back on my heels and gasped. The captain was on his knees now, too. One picture was called 'The Dreamer' and she lay on her side, on a marble seat. Flowers trailed over the marble seat. The other was even more artistic. 'The Early Bird'. A small bird peered anxiously down at a figure bathing in two inches of water; the water covered the ankles almost completely. I wished myself elsewhere.

'And what will those two beauties do for our wine-bills?' The welfare captain shook his head sadly. 'I've signalled Delhi twelve dozen repeats Nos. 139 and 140 (that's the figures quoted on the back). It's a risk—they can't read up there and there may be an elephant corps about the place, willing to unload its pin-ups on us. We may have to send these back, of course. G.H.Q.(I) may not like its *walls* bare.'

'I'll accept Venice and London, after all.'

'If we can get repeats or stuff by the same artist'—he was rewrapping them carefully in the newspaper—'our brutal and licentious soldiery will be springing smartly back into their bunks after tea and rising with the lark. Hope springs eternal in the B.O.R. breast!'

'And their officers won't get up at all, in case those pictures were painted by British time standards,' I told him nastily.

'How's the portrait going?' c

Dustypore had decided to honour Eleanore and me with tokens of their esteem. A deputation of B.O.R.s, one from every camp, had waited upon us, to inquire what form the tokens should take. 'We thought, amongst ourselves like, mebbe you'd fancy being painted. By one of the Eyeties?' 'If it's all the same to you,' returned Eleanore, 'I'd rather have one of the cigarette-cases they make.' The Italian prisoners turned their versatile hands to anything which would bring in a little pocket-money. I had rather fancied the idea of 'being painted' and put on record for posterity. But the deputation had other proposals as well. 'There's a big sum to be spent,' we had been informed. The 'Eyetic' handiwork covered the personal esteem; the big sum was there to cover wedding gifts. Eleanore and I, more touched than we cared to admit even to each other, had given it very careful thought and reached the same conclusion. The big sum, so freely donated, could only be used for one purpose—Welfare. Welfare in Dustypore itself! Eurasian girls sometimes turned up in Dustypore with babies. The B.O.R. fathers had usually been repatriated, and very little could be done about it. The girls had to be got out of a place like Dustypore with no delay at all. Families' Welfare, always hard pressed for funds to cope with servicemen's families at home, could spare no money for relief like this. Every C.O. and padre was well aware of the issues at stake, and from them I could always collect enough to send the destitute mothers back to their homes. What better wedding gift than a fund which would amply take care of this backwash of the British Army?

But now, 'How's the portrait going?' Captain Hardcastle wanted to know.

'I'm having the first sitting after lunch. The chap says he'll manage it in three sittings. Does that sound right to you?'

'We-ell, Augustus John takes a bit longer, but the Eyetic knows his own powers, I suppose. What's the pose and background to be, if I may ask?' He tapped the newspaper parcel.

'Everything welfare. Pure and simple.'

'Is that so? Who's doing the unveiling? The Brig.?'

The artist was setting up his easel on my little veranda as I hurried back from lunch. It was to be a waist upwards portrait, if I read the Italian gestures aright. He took me by the chin and swung my jaw this way and that, peering with half-closed eyes, to get a better idea of cause and effect.

'Just do me full face,' I suggested.

'Wot? Madame plees,' he smiled. 'Off coors.' I smiled politely back, wiped the smile off and settled firmly into the regulation welfare pose. Steady, boys, steady. After a few strokes the painter stepped back, head on one side. All painters have to do this—I've seen them on the films. I think he had, too. My veranda is small, the Eyetic took rather a big step. I eased him, glassy-eyed, into a chair. And picked up his palette and brush for him.

'The lump won't come up for a while,' I assured him. 'Would you like an aspirin and a glass of water?' He accepted both with Latin grace. After a very short rest, he was able to proceed. I grudged no craftsman the tricks of his trade and space to step back without concussion might mean all the difference between success and failure here. The B.O.R.s and their officers were laying out good money on this portrait; they must have full value, with all the technical trimmings. After reconnoitring around for a bit, we carried out my furniture and laid it in the driveway. I posed on the rolled-up mattress against the wall, and there was now full room for self-expression. It was a pity that this way the light was all wrong. We reconnoitred a little more. The artist, with my permission asked for and received, sat himself down on the top step, and we thrashed the matter out fully. There seemed to be only the two solutions. Either I must sit outside, squinting, in the full glare of the sun, or I must squat on the top step and let the artist stand outside, with the squint. Off coors, Italian gallantry came uppermost. He must be the one to stand outside. He was equipped with a very tiny, shrunken beret, ample enough for normal occasions. But apart from the regrettable squint, the Indian sun is deadly at midday, and who would want their

portrait painted in oils by an artist suffering from sunstroke? I wrung out my bath-towel under the tap and fastened it turban-wise round his head. At least, he now had a cool hat. The picture proceeded amicably.

The few lunchers from the dining-room were by this time wandering down the driveway. All paused. About fifty B.O.R.s had gathered to lean against the iron railings on the further side, staring in with interest. It did not bother me. The British Army could do or say almost nothing to embarrass me now, after so many months as their welfare officer. It was the Italian I felt sorry for. No use hoping he would not understand the remarks that were bandied about from driveway and railings. He had been a prisoner-of-war in bad company far too long. The sun was hot. It was comfortable leaning against the mattress in the doorway. I dozed off.

The artist woke me politely, taking me by the hand to do so.

'Lay off of it, Eyetie,' bellowed the voices from the rails. 'We ain't a-payin' fer your amooors!' The Eyetie shrugged, I shrugged too, equally non-committal. The sitting was over for today. The spectators now lined the railings, dozens deep. It was like a road-hole in Piccadilly.

Something was troubling the worker in oils. The pose! Off coors! Even Augustus John couldn't paint a picture of welfare dignity with a model who dozed off on a mattress. 'Madame will smile? Madame's eyes, they tweenkle and laugh! I paint, just so!'

We had four sittings before he was satisfied enough to add his name and 'Dustypore, India. 1945' in one corner. It was a simple portrait; the blue beret sat jauntily on one side above glinting coils, the eyes tweenkled and laughed, and the mouth couldn't keep straight either. I pointed out when all was finished that he had forgotten to give me tunic pockets. He hung them on, there and then, with curving brush. Posterity was catered for.

I asked the Italian if he would go back to his portrait-painting when he was repatriated. 'But, no, madame.' He was surprised. 'I do not paint the pictures in Italy. I am restoring the church roofs, in Rome. I am restoring in St. Peter's when the war did come.' I should never know if he meant that he replaced tiles and slates on the roof or if he touched up angels and cherubims on the ceilings. 'I only hope,' I confided to Eleanore, 'that, whichever it is, he won't make the mistake of stepping back.' I hoped it even more devoutly when I heard that both portrait and cigarette-case were to be tokens of Italian esteem, with no cash payments involved. Dustypore

never had regarded their Italian guests as enemies, in spite of the bombing of London. 'That lot don't even know where London is,' was Dustypore's verdict. And my friends the B.O.R.s were shrewd judges of character, friend or foe.

'... are you coming down here for Christmas?' wrote John. 'I've had to buy new socks. Glenda and Meggie and Nick are positive that Santa Claus won't pass me by, if my stocking is anchored alongside theirs ...'

'... and this will be one of my busiest times. I must be up here. I can't desert, John, even for you. I can leave by the late train on Christmas Day, after the hospital party. And then catch the midnight train back, on Boxing Day. Eleanore and I are carol-singing round the hospital wards on Christmas Eve. In the kingdom of the cracked, the shaky voice is queen ...'

The B.O.R.s missed their homes at Christmas, which was natural. They gloomed about the place, throwing cold water on every scheme thought up to divert them. But two days before Christmas they all cheered up and the party spirit roared round Dustypore.

Eleanore and I went the rounds with the male choir of carol-singers. We all stood, grouped in the clear moonlight, and sang outside each darkened ward. The patients joined in sometimes. The night nurses watched us, leaning on the veranda rails of their wards. They sang, and the moonlight glistened on something on their pale cheeks, as often as not.

'You'll upset every man-jack of them, with your carolling,' Matron had warned me sternly. 'I ought to forbid it, if I did my duty. All crying into their pillows and needing sleeping-pills, after you've gone. I've had some. Sick men are soft.'

'Oh! None of us thought of that. If there are any wards you don't——' But Matron had interrupted me.

'Do them all. We've plenty of pills. And don't miss out the V.D. Ward, like they did last year. Sing "God rest you merry gentlemen" as loudly as you can manage outside there. And do "Silent Night" outside every one; that's their favourite hymn, as far as I can find out. There's no gain without pain. ...' An amazing woman, our Matron! She was on the veranda of the V.D. Ward when we reached it, with the male orderly standing beside her. Her rich contralto voice helped us out, but not a sound came from the men within.

Eleanore surprised me that night, too. She left a present for every patient, with each ward sister, to be given to the lads first thing Christmas morning. Some gifts she had made herself, some she had bought, but there was a parcel for every bed.

We sat on my veranda, afterwards, to wait for midnight.

'I'm so lucky, Margo, being out here, beside Jeff. Some of the others aren't fit to be sent home; neither is Jeff, of course, but the wives and girl friends of the others will have to wait a little longer for their reunions.

'I'm so glad I won't have to stay on here without you. I've grown used to you . . .' and Eleanore grinned.

'Oh, Irene's all right. She's fiftyish and motherly. Do you know what I think?' She winked at me. 'The army needs a few mothers on the strength; wives are too unsettling!'

We sat in utter friendliness, gazing out at a dusty, moonlit garden, and for the first time for months I was suddenly conscious of the frogs again. 'It was just like this that first night I arrived,' I said suddenly. 'Waiting for the officers next door to come home. Ron said I'd get so used to the frogs I'd never even hear them. Frogs! In a dried-up place like this!'

'They live in the wells; there's always some water in the bottom at least. Dustypore! It shook me that first night I saw you! I'd had three weeks here, and I could see what the place was like. Woman crazy! Then you arrived; the pretty widow, they called you. If you'd been a *merry* widow as well. . . !'

Two *tongas* came jingling through the gates.

'Still up, you two?' My three neighbours came to stand at the foot of the steps. 'What about a drink? It must be midnight.'

We all had a glass of sherry, to herald Christmas morning.

'Happy Christmas, Comrade Michaelis,' smiled Eleanore Tarling. 'I wonder where we'll all be this time next year?'

Chapter 16

Commander John Douglas and I were married in the Scots Kirk, Bombay, on a Tuesday afternoon—the Scots Kirk, built on the strip of land which had been part of the dowry of a Stuart king's bride and the first foothold of the British in India.

Isabel, jubilant, motherly, tactful and blundering by turns, took full control of everything. She had been rather keen on a white wedding. 'You'd make a lovely white bride, with your colour hair.'

'But, Isabel, there isn't time for dress fittings and I'm a widow. . . .' We had still been discussing it, sitting on the sea veranda, when John arrived for tea.

'Have I got a vote?' he had demanded. 'Because I want—I'd like Margaret to wear her uniform.'

'Well, I'd like to be married in uniform, too. If—John really thinks I'll look nice enough?' Isabel had washed her hands of the bride's turn-out.

'It's your honeymoon which is worrying me most. Only seventy-two hours' leave—where can you go in that time without getting there just in time to come back again?'

'I've already fixed Juhu,' John had said. 'I know it's all rather primitive, but you're quite right, we haven't much choice in the time. Gillespie is lending us his shack. It's the end one, miles along the beach. Most of these huts are only used week-ends. It's rather a romantic spot, really.'

It was to have been a very quiet wedding, with only a few friends for the simple wedding breakfast at Malabar Hill afterwards. But Isabel, thwarted of all else, as she loudly proclaimed, was lavish with the invitations. Dustypore turned out in force to see me married; every officer who could get a leave pass. But the B.O.R.s were absentees, though Corporal Batters and Private Lester came to the church. 'Don't you worry,' my little C.O. told me; 'the pair of them will drink your health at Green's. I've fixed it, all laid on, all laid on.'

It was strange, going up the aisle on Charles's arm, remembering another church, where I had gone to make the same vows to another man in another kind of uniform. A little village church, over whose defiant square grey tower the Battle of Britain had ebbed and flowed. I supposed all widows had the same feelings when they remarried; hoping if they had been happy before that they would be just as happy again; praying, if they had been unhappy, that this second chance would give them all that they had hoped and longed for on that first occasion; desperately determined, happy or unhappy, to do better this time, and not repeat the mistakes of girlhood or ignorance. Charles, sitting beside me in the car on the way to church, had held my hand firmly. 'I'm glad, Isabel and I are both glad, that it's John Douglas this time,' was all he said.

As John and I signed the register, a ghost stood beside me and whispered, half-tenderly, half-mockingly, 'Look at that blot, Margaret—MICHAELIS!' This time, I made no blot.

We came down the steps of Isabel's bungalow in a coloured snowstorm of confetti. Isabel was crying, but it was my little C.O. who closed the car door with a decisive snap and called, 'Good-bye, Commander and Mrs. Douglas!'

I supposed it must be just as awkward for a man, to be going off on his first honeymoon with a wife who had already been

on one with the man she loved and chose first. He would be terribly anxious not to do or say anything to rouse needless memories.

As we drove off John stretched out his long legs and sighed. 'I've been to my own wedding!'

'Did you enjoy it?' I asked politely.

'I can hardly remember a thing about it. Since dawn, when I had two biscuits instead of one with my tea, to bolster up my stamina, it's been a haze. Did you enjoy it?' His eyes laughed down at me.

'I can remember everything right up to lunch-time but not much after that.'

'Lunch-time? Did you eat a hearty meal?'

'Of course. Isabel insisted. Didn't you?'

'No. It's not done, Margaret. The bride may, but the bridegroom—that was me—leans heavily on his best man's counsel. Just one sandwich and coffee, in case my hand shook and I dropped the ring. Action stations, he warned me in that vestry place. Target on the horizon! You've got your big guns nicely spiked, all your ammunition's overboard, you've only got to sign on your rebel crew now. Don't bother to fly any distress signals; it's just heave alongside and grapple!'

'Is he married, your best man?'

'No, he's not married. I'd like to be his right hand, when the day arrives for him!'

'Are you hungry, really? Because Glenda pointed out it was supposed to be my cake, and everybody else was eating it. She bagged a special piece for me, and I had to take it. That's what's bulging out my handbag,' and I opened my bag and took out a thick wedge of cake, wrapped in a hanky. 'Are you allowed to chew, in uniform, in an open taxi?'

'This is a bit of a shock to me! Reverses all my ideas of weddings. I never dreamed, all the times I've waved away a happy couple, that they hardly waited to get round the corner before they tucked into their own wedding cake!'

We were in the suburbs of Bombay now, clear of the narrow, crowded bazaar lanes and on to a wide main road, with tall blocks of balconied flats on either side. 'It's all very modern,' I marvelled. 'When I'm posted down here, we'll have to explore. I haven't heard from Delhi yet, nothing definite. I saw you having a long confab. with the Brig. Did he say anything to you about it?'

'We did have a few words,' agreed John, rather uncomfortably, I thought. 'Look, that's the mill district over there.' I looked at the massed chimneys belching smoke into the sun.

'And that's Worli, over there. The—R.A.F. are stationed there.'

'I'll be their welfare officer, too. The men with the handle-bar moustachios . . .' and I told him about the Brains Trust.

'Everything out here always looks as if it needs a good dusting.' Apart from the trees which lined this main road and the scattered palms, there was hardly a trace of greenery in the flat miles stretching out on either side. 'In the monsoon, it wants a good mopping up!'

The sun went down as we drove along a roughly made road, across the parched-up land and then through an avenue of palm-trees, which thickened out on either side until the car-lights shone on nothing but their scaly trunks.

'Can you hear the sea now?' asked John. 'Another couple of miles of this and we'll be home.' It sounded rather strange, to be arriving home, alone. Together.

Later we walked across the ridged sands, to the water's very edge. The fringe of palm-trees ended a few feet from our front door, and the wide, glistening sands stretched for miles on either side.

'The Indian Ocean at your feet, the Royal Navy in your arms, what more can welfare want?' John demanded.

'Nothing at all. John, are we alone? I mean, isn't there anyone near, to see or hear us?'

'I shouldn't think so. There aren't any lights up this end. Why, Margaret? Why all this anxiety? You're—not frightened of me?'

'I want to be alone with you.'

There was something I had to tell him, out here in the open.

'I've got to tell you about Peter. Now. Tonight.' I could feel him stiffen against me. 'You see, Peter and I——'

'I'd rather not hear. Isabel—warned me—that you still loved him, but I thought—I hoped—you'd forgotten him. With me.'

'I've got to be honest and tell you. Everything.' I flushed, and hoped John wouldn't notice. He was looking down at me, far too intently now. 'You'll know anyway . . . soon . . .' I mumbled.

'Go on, then, if you must,' he said quietly. 'But if it's anything—whatever it is, it'll make no difference. I love you and you're mine now.'

'Well, Peter and I——' How did one say this sort of thing to a man who was still partly a stranger? 'You see, we weren't

ever—sort of properly married. There wasn't enough time for—~~for~~—' But he wouldn't let me go on. One hand held my face close against his chest and one arm kept me locked tightly to him.

'For God's sake, Margaret, there's no need to tell me any more. Forget it. I'll *make* you forget it . . . and *him*.' He kissed me fiercely and I kissed him back, just as fiercely, and he was triumphant when at last he released me. 'You're Margaret Douglas now, and I'm rather proud of my welfare wife.'

'Are you? I'm making a mess of telling you, John. No, I'm going to. I married Peter, in a church, but we didn't have time for a honeymoon. That's what I'm trying to tell you.' He was staring, unbelieving. 'We were married in the morning, he had two hours' special leave, and then he had to dash back. It was the Battle of Britain and they needed every pilot. Peter was killed that afternoon. He crashed into the sea . . .' The B.B.C. voice came echoing down the shining road across the sea, across the years. 'Twenty-one of our aircraft are missing . . . seven of the pilots are known to be safe.' But my pilot had not been one of the seven.

'And I told you to forget him. I'm sorry, Margaret.'

I went on. I had to tell the whole story now. It would be a relief to tell it, to someone like John Douglas. I lived through it all again, standing beside him, with the baby waves lapping at our feet. . . .

'Peter and I had fixed our wedding for early August, with seven days' honeymoon. When the Germans began attacking in earnest, his leave was cancelled indefinitely. Everybody knew things were pretty grim and nobody talked of very much else except the "air scores". Peter wired: "Let's get married down here. Everything laid on for Friday." That was on a Wednesday. It was just a little country station, and Peter wasn't there to meet me—just a woman with a pram. "I'm Mrs. Blyth, if you're Miss Hamilton? The suitcase can lie across the pram—keep your legs under it, Timmie." Peter had laid everything on all right. The village was a mile away on one side of the railway station, and Mrs. Blyth's cottage was two miles and a half the other side. I was to board with her. There was a baby in the pram, as well as two-year-old Timmie, and we walked home. I was too excited to listen to all Mrs. Blyth said except once. "They're quiet today." I thought she meant her children, and agreed, smiling, but she jerked her head up at the sky. "THEM! Up there! At it most days and nights. The kids sleep through it all, and that's a mercy."

"Oughtn't you to be evacuated or something? It can't be very safe for the children?" "Where *is* safe, these days?" It had seemed such a happy countryside, everything just on the turn to golden for autumn.

Peter came roaring along on a motor-bike in the evening. "Let's get out of this," he suggested, and so we walked across some stubbly fields and then sat down on a bank under a blackberry hedge. The blackberries were ripe, and Peter fed me with them until my mouth and tongue were stained purple. "You'd better be ready early tomorrow. I'll be round for you just after nine." Everything was so peaceful. We just sat and talked; Peter didn't seem to want to kiss me much. It was dusk when the Spitfires streaked across the sky headed straight for a low droning which grew louder, in the north, every moment. "Are they——?" I began, and then Peter leaned across me and I was lying looking up, and he was kissing me passionately and muttering, "Margaret darling . . . darling . . . don't let's wait . . . till tomorrow; I want you tonight, out here. You want me, too, don't you?" But I was the daughter of a Highland manse, where expediency waited on God, and His laws were not moulded to suit expediency. I was tempted, but not enough to be willing. "Don't spoil things, Peter," I had urged, talking like a tuppenny-ha'penny heroine. "I didn't think you were like that." He had laughed. "Didn't you? My wings are *sewn* on; they don't sprout. I'm going to be very much like that tomorrow, so why not tonight? What difference does it all make, tonight or tomorrow? If you're going to be willing enough tomorrow, what's the matter with you now?" "It does make a difference. To a woman. I can't explain . . ." and the tuppenny-ha'penny heroine had begun to blubber. Peter had been very gentle then, comforting me, and I had clung tightly to him until *he* had pushed me off. We had walked back to the cottage, arms entwined around each other, young, happy and head over heels in love. "You'll be a willing bride tomorrow?" he had smiled. "Yes!" I had promised.

Peter and a squadron leader had been on the doorstep early next morning, long before nine o'clock. "Hurry up," Peter had called. "There'll only just be time enough." He had dashed inside to talk to Mrs. Blyth. She and the two children had been hurriedly installed in the car, and Peter's friend had tied the folding pram on to the back. "There isn't time to bring you back," he had explained, "and I can't hire another car for love or money. I don't want you to walk back alone." He and the squadron leader and I had been very gay on the drive to the church, teasing Mrs. Blyth, who acted as Matron of Honour.

The padre had handed me a bunch of flowers. "From my wife. She thought you might not have time. . . ."

Planes had whistled over in waves, so that none of us really heard what the padre was saying; I just watched his mouth, and knew that Peter was looking down at me. The throb-throb faltering of a crippled Spitfire followed us into the vestry. "He's had it," remarked Squadron Leader Spring unemotionally, and Peter just nodded. The crash shook my hand as I signed the register. "Look at that blot, Margaret—MICHAELIS! You a pilot's wife!" Peter and I had walked down the centre aisle of the silent church, arm in arm, keeping perfect step, for the triumphant chords of the "Wedding March" which had thrilled decades of other brides on other days had seemed to vibrate round us, too. In the front porch he had pulled me into a corner and we had clung to each other until the car horn had sounded impatiently outside. "Are you flying today?" I had whispered fearfully. "God knows! If somebody tells Goering it's my wedding day, anything may happen!" He had been laughing. "I'll come when I can, darling. It'll seem like an eternity until I've got you in my arms again . . ." The car was already gathering speed as he swung himself on to the running-board and turned for a last wave and salute.

'September 6th, 1940! The padre had shaken hands again. "This church is always open, Mrs. Michaelis, if you would care to come in again, any time." Mrs. Blyth had strapped her family into the pram. "Ah, well, now we've the three miles' walk home again and I clean forgot to take the porridge pot off the fire." It had seemed an even happier countryside this time. I whistled to the birds and was certain nothing could happen to Peter. Goering wouldn't know he had just got married, and that took care of that! But the three-and-a-half-miles' trudge in high-heeled bridal shoes had raised a blister or two, and I had to sit with my feet in a bucket of hot water and salt while Mrs. Blyth scraped out the burnt pot. After that she had showed me how to bake bread. It had all been so homely, so reassuring—two women getting on with the essentials of life. Almost ignoring the men overhead who went backwards and forwards in their own clever inventions, to play ferociously with the essentials of death. There had been nothing to warn me that already Peter had gone into his long eternity of waiting. It was Squadron Leader Spring who told me that. And I walked for the third time beside the pram and Timmie and the baby. This time as a widow.'

I lived through it all again, standing beside John, with the

little waves lapping at our feet. '... and all these years I've bitterly regretted not saying yes. I let him go without memories. I didn't love him enough, because I wouldn't have said no to you, John. Not in the Battle of Britain.'

'You'd have said no to me all right,' John told me slowly. 'You'd still have said no to me now. I don't think a man ever really forgives a woman for coming down to his level. I—he'd still love her as much, but she can't be an ideal any more. . . .' Five years of self-reproach and imaginative frustration began to roll away then. Peter must have understood. If his special leave had been cancelled, there would have been a different tale to tell to this man I loved. Defiant, openly ashamed or secretly proud, whatever the manner of telling, it would all have seemed rather sordid to the man who had to listen. John would never have let me finish that sort of tale.

'It's a man's world in wartime. The insecurity of it all shakes you women.' John's voice was very gentle. He pulled me round to face him, standing with his hands on my shoulders. 'Sex can always find a buyer, but a tuppenny-ha'penny heroine sets her own value. Cut out all the heroics, Margaret, and be honest with yourself. You were honest enough with your—Peter.' He turned away from me then, staring out to sea. 'I've been jealous. Jealous as all hell. Watching my step, holding myself in, waiting for some sort of lead from you. I wanted the slate wiped clean, and I knew from Isabel that it couldn't be. You were all dignity—and if you're hungry, have this cake—in that taxi. HUNGRY!' He turned, laughing, suddenly exultant, and bundled me up into his arms. 'Hang on tight round my neck; I'm going to carry you home. I've had my cake, and now I want my wife. I've never been so hungry in all my life. And it's Navy fashion for you, after this. . . .'

The palm trees had looked down on it all before; the sea had sung a lullaby to all this times without number; the stars have always winked at what they saw below. Only the moon dropped lower in the sky, to cast a glow on little square church towers at the other side of the world. No longer defiant, but back to the ancient essentials of peace.

Chapter 17

'They oughter shup their hop, they oughter! No glit'n spin, jus' chit an' spatter! It's pals an' fences, that's what this is!'

'I beg your pardon? You've been talking Arabic or something ever since you came in here, and I wish you'd stick to plain English.'

'Come orf of it! You savvy army slang orl' right! Fancy bits like you take all their dough. No coin for servin' soldiers.'

'Private Herberts, the War Office will not agree to let you buy furniture on the hire-purchase system and make them responsible for the payment of the instalments. Why should they? You've only been in their army five minutes. You haven't even got a house yet, to put the furniture in. Are they supposed to pay for the storage, too? And my own H.Q. don't encourage scroungers like you. As for fancy bits like me, I don't get paid. My sailor husband supports me, to sit here and listen to chisellers like you. Do I make myself clear enough?'

'I'm gonna take this a bit further, see? Me M.P. will git crackin' on it all; he'll see I has me rights——'

'I hope he will! I'd like to see to it you had all your rights, too. And a few straight lefts! You've worked in a munition factory all the war. Now the place has closed down, you've been hauled into the army by the scruff of your neck and start talking about your rights! Why didn't you save up all your bonuses to buy furniture?'

'You better keep your sweet trap shut. You ain't no officer, all lah-de-dah. Welfare me a——! Welfare me ——' but I had had enough.

'Now, Private Herberts, I won't bother reporting you to your C.O. for insulting language. You're not worth it. Just leave my office at once, will you, or I'll call the corporal.'

'Here, mam,' said a very quiet voice, and Corporal Batters appeared in the doorway of the small back room. I had never known him come in through the back door before. Private Herberts left, quick-marching with the corporal.

I sat at my table and stared out through the net curtains. I had quite a few callers like Herberts these days; the latest call-ups in replacement drafts from U.K. All keen on welfare as a means of getting something for nothing. Their whole outlook on service life was different; they didn't just grouse, they whined. They made a great to-do about their 'rights'. My friends the B.O.R.s—those long-service warriors—talked

about their rights, too. But the only 'rights' they had in mind were their rights within the four walls of their own homes, when they got back there again. And they left politics alone, apart from Mr. Churchill—'their old basket', as they called him with respect and affection. The shock when he had been 'demobbed' first had run through every rank in Dustypore. I sometimes felt now that I ought to provide a soapbox for some of my clients when they began their bitter harangues about this and that.

As soon as he'd gone, I felt a little remorseful at my sharp treatment of Private Herberts. I was feeling a bit disgruntled about my own affairs, and it must be affecting my 'welfare attitude'. Five weeks since John and I were married, and I was still in Dustypore and pledged to stay there until repatriation! He was being sent to Japan. He had told me about it, just before we had left the little shack in Juhu.

'Don't sailors get repatriated?' I had asked miserably.

'Repatriation? What's that?' John had been falsely cheery. 'You've married a Regular, sweetheart. There's no job for me now in Bombay, so they must send me somewhere else. You'll have to stay out here another six months. I'd rather go to Japan than go home without you.'

'But they'll keep you in Japan.'

'I doubt it. I'm overdue for long home leave. If they do—well, it's follow the fleet for a naval wife! You'll get used to it.' And looking into his eyes, I knew I could get used to anything, anywhere, any time, for his sake. 'I've never had a wife to leave behind before,' he had added quietly. 'I hope I'll get used to it myself.'

'We'll have a few weeks together, in Bombay, if you're not sailing until April.'

'You're not being transferred, Margaret. Your Brigadier *might* have let you go, if my job had been permanent, but not now. Instead, he's fixing it so that you can spend my embarkation leave with me. I get three weeks.' And that had been that.

Isabel and the children had already sailed for home. Passages had been offered to them, and as civilians were fitted in on the homeward-bound boats only as and when space permitted, Charles had insisted that they should go. 'It's time the children went home,' he had explained. 'I'm gazetted for home leave in June, anyway, and if we refuse this chance, we can't expect another when we do want to go. I ought to get a single passage more easily. I'll give up this bungalow and do some tours of inspection round the districts.'

I was learning resignation and patient acceptance of the

inevitable in that hardest of all schools, the British Army. Just like the B.O.R.s and their officers.

The corporal had come bustling back again.

'The Jason family, mam; they're coming along the road. Did you want to see them?'

The Jason family! Seventeen of them, from Sergeant Jason, who had served in India for over twenty years without a home leave, his plump, placid little Eurasian wife, through Nigel, aged sixteen, and two pairs of twins to the baby, aged five months. Jason had been due for release in 1940 and would have stayed in India, joining the Indian Police. But he had had to serve on through the war years, and now he saw the writing on the wall; the British Raj was crumbling fast, and he no longer fancied the Indian Police.

'I'm worried, once we gets home, mam,' he had come in to tell me. 'Peace-time repatriation is different, like. They sends you back afore you're time-expired, so you can live in army quarters and have a look round Civvy Street. But I'm to be demobbed straight away, me being years over time-expired. I've nowhere to go. I'll have me pension and I've got near on forty pounds saved to tide us over till I gets a job.'

'What about relatives? Or friends?'

He had shrugged. 'You know how it is, mam. Twenty years out here, and me not expecting to go back. You loses touch. There's no one I can call to mind.'

Families' Welfare couldn't do anything at all about the housing problem, for any B.O.R. The Children's Homes were always full up, with waiting lists, and only very urgent cases of dire need could be squeezed in, at a pinch. Fifteen children would be an utter impossibility. But forty pounds would vanish in two or three weeks if the Jasons had to go to even the very cheapest boarding-house. It was such a large family! So I had signalled London and they had been allowed to stay on in Dustypore, in army quarters, until something could be arranged for them at home. The return signal 'PROCEED HOME TO UK STOP ARMY BILLETS PROVIDED PRO TEM STOP WILL TAKE OVER AND COPE ON ARRIVAL' had made the sergeant a very relieved man. It hadn't been his fault he was years over time-expired!

'The Jasons,' announced Batters, and pulled one curtain aside. I stood up as they filed in and then almost sat down again. They were dressed as for the North Pole. Mrs. Jason in a thick, brown, velour cloth coat trimmed with fur, a felt hat with a pompon and fur-lined boots; Nigel in grey flannel 'longs' showing beneath his heavy tweed overcoat

and a woollen muffler snug round his neck; his brothers all in thick coats with long woollen stockings and stout boots; his sisters in cosy tam-o'-shanters and coats and wool gauntlet gloves; the baby, the *pièce de résistance*, in a white knitted garment which covered every portion except the little hot face. Audrey, the eldest girl, carried him triumphantly and wiped away his dribbles on the back of her glove. Only the sergeant was as usual, and he looked like a plucked chicken in his khaki shorts and open-necked shirt amongst his padded-out family.

'I thought you weren't leaving until tomorrow?' I managed to say.

'Merlie wanted to show you all the new clothes, and this was easiest,' he explained with a jerk of the head towards his little beaming wife. He kept his eyes averted from his crew, and I could understand why. I had to look at them and the beads gathered on my brow and began to trickle down. If their bodies matched their damp, scarlet faces, they must have been suffering, but they stood as erect as a platoon of Guards on parade. Only the two-year-old, clinging to his Mum's coat, tried to ease his Balaclava helmet off his ears.

'I'm awfully glad you came in, but you'll have to get all the stuff packed away, so I won't delay you. I'm coming to the station to see you off tomorrow. . . .'

The Jason family, the first of many such families to surge through Dustypore, homeward bound to a land they had never seen, with their time-expired soldier fathers who were accepting repatriation only because the British would be leaving India and they did not want to be left behind. Maria Shoemantle, that staunch colonel's lady, made it her duty to outfit them all with cold-weather clothing.

'That little lot,' said the corporal, on tiptoes to straighten the curtains. 'I wonder, mam . . . ' I was wondering, too.

I hadn't seen the last of Private Herberts. He was due for posting to Madras, and I sent off his file to my colleague there, just in case he called on her about his furniture.

The 'fractures' ward was my last port of call the next Sunday morning. There was an air of suppressed excitement about the place. I wrote home mail for the arm fractures and exchanged back-chat with each bed as I dawdled through. The patients seemed to be sharing some private joke, and the ward sister smiled as if she were in on it, too.

The man in the very last bed lay quietly. He seemed to be seriously injured, head swathed in bandages and his right arm and shoulder in splints.

'He looks in a bad way,' I whispered to Sister, hovering at my elbow. 'Is he conscious?'

'I hope so,' she smiled back, and without the gravity which the occasion demanded.

'He's had to slup his hop, no pals nor fences.' The walking patient with his own arm in a sling leant almost affectionately over the bed. 'Ain't yer, cock?'

Private Herberts's eyes glared at me through his bandages.

'But I thought you were going to Madras?' I exclaimed stupidly.

'So he was and so he is, mam. Ain't yer, chum?' and his spokesman leaned over even more affectionately.

I sat down on the bedside chair and unscrewed my fountain pen.

'If you'll just leave us, I'll write his home mail.' The spokesman retreated two yards, to sit on the edge of his own bed. 'Now, Herberts, if you raise one finger that means no; two fingers means yes. Do you understand?' There was sheer hatred in the eyes glaring back at me. 'Don't you want me to write to your wife?' One finger shot up promptly.

'Course he wants his letters wrote all nice for him. Don't yer, chum?' The voice from the next bed was mild but reaction was immediate. Two fingers were sticking up. 'He just don't want to be a trouble to you, mam. Do yer, chum?'

'I've got your wife's address in the office, so I can just say you're in hospital after an accident and you can't manage to write to her yourself this week.' I wrote busily. 'Now, is there any little special message for her?' The one finger came up. 'Oh, all right. Can you just read what I've written and then sign it with your left hand? That will reassure her a little. Can you manage with your left hand?'

'Course he can manage, mam. He's been writin' me notes. Tellin' me to shut up or he'll punch me face in for me when his hop ain't slup no more. When I mentions me regiment, he chucks his little pencil on the floor. Naughty boy, ain't yer, chum?'

'What has your regiment got——' And then I stopped. I knew which regiment it must be.

'The Toughs, mam.'

A sudden shocking thought had struck me. 'Perhaps I'd better just tell your wife what sort of an accident you've had. Was it a lorry, a jeep, knocked down, run over?' One finger stuck up resolutely. 'An explosion, then?' The finger stayed up. I looked round for Sister, but she was up at the other end of the ward.

'Course it were an accident, mam. He was trying to swallow something and it broke his jaw. Then he runs into something hard and it broke his collar-bone. He fell on his elbow then and that broke his arm. Real misfortunate, he is. Now, ain't that right, cock?'

A second finger came slowly up.

'I'm—I'm sorry, Private Herberts. But I'll send a visitor round to reassure your wife, in case she worries.'

I called in for a word with the corporal next door, on my way back to the hotel. 'Private Herberts is in hospital with a broken jaw, a broken collar-bone and a broken arm. What sort of accident did he have?'

'Seems like a bad one, mam.'

'I know that. What I want to know is, how did it happen?'

'He's not in this camp, mam.'

'I know that, too. He says it wasn't an accident at all.'

'Then he's a bigger fool,——' began Corporal Batters. I waited.

'He's a dirty fighter, that Herberts. His *basha* warned us. So it had to be a Tough. There's six Toughs left in Dustypore, and his pals don't want no trouble with them.'

'Six to one!'

'One Tough was plenty, mam. Nor their best scrapper, neither. It was a fair fight. Some of the M.P.s fixed the rules and stood by handy.'

'Where's the Tough?'

The corporal grinned. It was foolish to ask, really. A few bad cuts and bruises, perhaps a black eye, but the Tough would stay on his feet regardless. A steam-roller would have had to look to its laurels, if it tried conclusions with the aftermath of Plassey. But I was rather worried. It would be bad for discipline if B.O.R.s were allowed to think I approved of them fighting about me.

'If every soldier who comes to my office can look forward to a spell in hospital if he uses army slang to me, then I may as well slup up hop. I mean, shut up shop.'

'He called you names, mam. I heard him at it. And he knew you wouldn't put him on a charge. It's bad for young troops to get away with any lip to officers.' Batters was at his most fatherly. 'When a lad's in bad trouble, then he lets rip with his language, but this Harabic stuff has to be discouraged.'

I supposed he was right. The corporal became expansive.

'“Let's hear the Harabic for lousy,” the Tough tells him, this Herberts. To get him punching mad, like. “Let's hear the Harabic for lousy, so's I can pull your jaws apart and spit it

down them." Harabic Herbie, that's what the Tough called him just before he breaks his jaw for him. He'll be Harabic Herbie now till he gets his demob.'

'Is it another accident that there's a Tough in the very next bed, looking after him?'

'Pure co-hin-cy-dince, mam, pure co-hin-cy-dince! He hurt his wrist opening a tin of beer. Tinned beer!' Batters let himself go on the subject. 'Half a pint of wallop all done up like Brassol! You shakes the can automatic like and it's all noise and froth! Tinned beer!' He remembered something else, likely to divert me from fights in my honour. 'This other young lady, mam. Is there anything special besides the dusting?'

'No, thanks. She'll be here tomorrow morning, and I'm going off in the afterticon. I'll be back before you've had time to miss me. Barely four weeks!'

'It's the luck of the draw, mam.' He was quietly sympathetic. 'My wife won't let me re-sign. She has me spoken for on the Edinburgh trams, through her uncle on her mother's side.' The Edinburgh trams would get a bargain; every ticket the corporal dealt out would have its little hole punched with accuracy and precision.

Edna Leveritt came down from Western Command to take over the office in my absence! John and I were going to Simla for the three weeks' embarkation leave. He had had to go up to Delhi, anyway, and was waiting there for me now. I explained to Edna about the sparrows and Tip and Run and the bugles and the frogs and the lawn and the tents. She said faintly, 'Dora and I live in a proper hotel with hot and cold . . .'

'Well, you won't be here long, and you'll probably like it so much you'll want to swop with me. The water in the tap's never really cold, except in the monsoon.'

She looked round the office and felt the net curtains gingerly.

'Don't finger them too much; they crumble. They've never been the same since I starched them with glue. I could buy new stuff, but I'm rather attached to that particular pair. They've—rubbed shoulders with so much.'

There were two of them in Western Command. It appeared they had a suite of offices; a room with two clerks, a room for interviews, a waiting-room and a private sanctum all to themselves. It sounded unwieldy to me. 'I expect you're much busier than I am, though. This is the tap. I bring clean towels from the hotel every day. The B.O.R.s sometimes have to come in here.'

'You let them wash in here?' She was rather shocked.

'They cry sometimes. . . .' We looked at each other and were on common ground at last. Edna nodded, but I didn't ask her how Western Command coped. They did cope, That was sure and certain.

'Those are the closed case-files and the corporal next door has taken over the dusting. He'll keep you right. Everything else is routine.'

'Transport?' she asked. 'We have a jeep and driver of our own.'

'All laid on here, too. Just stand in the road anywhere, and nothing on wheels will pass by, when they see the blue beret. The Brig. will stop, too.'

Irene Bannister, fiftyish and motherly, had already settled down placidly in Dustypore. She joined Edna and me at lunchtime and gave the place a boosting. 'A change from Chundlibaug! A real roof overhead. Every time I forget to be thankful, it gives me a hefty crack to remind me. We lived in tents in Chundlibaug . . . with a canvas bath and a basin on a tripod. Ritzy place, Dustypore!' The luck of the draw!

I travelled down to Bombay in a truck. I could have gone straight to Delhi from Dustypore, but truck and aeroplane were much more exciting. And quicker, incidentally! The driver and I sang duets—we harmonized so well that we did 'Annie Laurie' several times. Then we came to a level-crossing—those curses of road-travel in India. Local trains seemed to make wide detours and curves, and after a patient wait at one crossing, you reached the next and had another patient wait, for the same train to chuff-chuff past once more. The keeper of the gates, entrenched in importance in a small corrugated-iron hut beside the line, shared his free residence with all his near and not so near relatives. He locked the gates at least forty minutes before any train was due. No pleas moved him, it was orders; his interpretation of orders, anyway.

The driver and I grew bored, waiting. We ate some sandwiches. 'I want to do some shopping, too,' I complained bitterly. 'Can't we get him to let us through? Show him something. . . ?' I turned out my shoulder-bag, but there was nothing either impressive or important-looking in it. The driver unpacked his pockets in sympathy. A gaudy-looking piece of cardboard fell out of the left-hand breast pocket.

'It's the wife's Christmas card.' Still with the 1½d. in pencil on the back and signed 'Lovingly, Annie.'

'Can I borrow it?' But he had unexpected scruples for a full private. 'This will be something to write home about,' I

urged. 'You must be stuck for something to put in Annie's letters often.' He agreed, but pointed out his Annie might not fancy getting authentic details of life in an Indian prison, from him. 'Even if I'm let write at all. And what,' he added, 'if that hellhound keeps my card?' That last bit explained all the reluctance. This was a much-cherished possession. I urged no more. But the gamble of it all intrigued him; after another few minutes' waiting, he handed over his Christmas card.

Urgent signalling brought the hellhound, in his turban and loin-cloth, ambling over to the side of the truck. I spoke up, putting as much authority, British officer, British Raj, into my face and tones as I could manage, without going falsetto. '*Chitty warrant hai. Babut jaldi. British General sahib motor gharri munta, Babut jaldi.*' ('Here is a written order. Very urgent. British General needs this lorry at once.') My Hindustani vocabulary was fully extended in this speech; I said it with minor alterations to the *dhobi* every week.

The important chitty warrant was placed in the hand held out: beside me, its owner heaved a sad sigh of anticipated bereavement. I think the silver bells had some effect, the robins probably helped out, too, but it was the flourishing 'Lovingly, Annie', looked at upside down, which clinched the matter. Waving the card and smiling broadly, the gatekeeper ran back to his hut . . . we held our breath . . . was he going to phone Bombay for confirmation? No time for that; he was out again, with a huge key lever and four *chokras* (boys) at his heels. The gates were rolling back with this united man-power. I swung down out of the truck to walk across the track and make sure of collecting the important warrant at the other side. Behind us, lined up, were about a dozen bullock-carts and an American jeep. The Yanks hadn't guessed there was a female passenger aboard the British truck or they would have come over for pleasant chit-chat. The gates were shutting again and I had plucked the card from our grinning henchman before they could make the distance. I blew them an elaborate kiss.

'The pipes, the pipes, were ca-alling' from our rendering of 'Danny Boy' when the second level-crossing came in sight, ten minutes later. I had Annie's card out ready as we drew up, bonnet almost touching the gates. The hut was deserted this time. The whole dusty landscape was deserted.

'Nothing doing,' grinned the driver. 'That bloke must be going to sprint across here when he's opened the other one, or mebbe he'll just come round on the train. He'll want *baksheesh* for letting us get as far as this so soon!' India always had a smart cuff on the ear ready for anyone fool enough to try to

circumvent her ancient slowness. I handed over a cigarette. We sat, talking about Annie.

There was a terrific hullooing in the distance and we both looked out.

'The Burma stars,' said the driver and spat over the side.

'I must say I like cowboy films, and I'm still trying to meet a cowboy Yank. Coming back?'

'I'll bring my spanner if they take you up the wrong way round.'

I reproved him at once. These men were our allies. 'I'm in uniform and—and untouchable. I met some G.I.s once when I was working in Cambridge. Bunches of them used to be hanging round Woolworth's in the main street when I passed down there on my way to the office most mornings. The place wasn't even open, but I think they were homesick. Cambridge is rather an un-American-like town! Anyway, one morning the siren went just as I walked past. They could have let me duck into the doorway beside them, but three of them barged forward and tackled me round the knees. To put me down horizontal, out of harm's way! It was nice of them, really, but my face got jammed against a drain-grid, and none of them were exactly lightweights, on my back. I was the only casualty in Cambridge that morning, apart from my hat and my stockings. I can still smell that drain-grid, with no effort at all! If I need a spanner, I'll borrow theirs.'

'You're a card, mam, right enough,' and he leaned on his wheel and laughed. I was waiting for the jeep when it drew up.

We reached Bombay just after six. 'The lads all wish you and the commander the very best, mam,' and as the truck drove off, I pushed Dustypore right out of my mind.

I was staying overnight at the Y.W.C.A. The civil plane from Bombay to Delhi left from the aerodrome at Santa Cruz, several miles inland, for those with no transport of their own, a bus was laid on, timed to depart at 4 a.m. The windows of the Y.W.C.A. looked down on the street corner, where the airline bus stood to muster its passengers. If any little mishap should occur about timing, I could either lean out and shout 'Half a mo'' or jump out. Everything ship-shape and fool-proof!

The four jeep Yanks had assured me they wouldn't get into official trouble for consorting with British female officers, so I had supper with them at a place called Mongini's. The B.O.R.s we passed looked bitterly at me, but they were being unjust to their sob-sister; my nose was still at the welfare grindstone, in their very best interests.

'You've got far too much money to fling around. I'm surprised at Eleanor Roosevelt permitting it. She ought to stop it. You chaps oughtn't to get a cent more to spend outside your own country than the soldiers you serve alongside.'

'Howcome?' Expressive word, that; it says it all.

'Well, if most of your pay was saved for you back in America, you'd have a nice nest-egg to go home to. And there'd be a lot less vice around your camps. I'm sick of the very word "Yank" in my job.'

Their jaws worked hard at their gum, but they didn't say very much in their own defence. A British welfare officer knows too much about them, for one thing. 'The British could refuse our dollars, come to that. They ain't saints, ma'am.' 'Some of your dames ain't even honest. They fix the ante up and cash in advance. It's bottoms up—meanin' hard liquor—right on along then, and we cain't stand up, let alone co-lec'. Then these dames vamooses. I ain't co-lected more'n oncet from you British dames. It ain't honest.'

It wasn't, of course; but, then, honour wouldn't enter into transactions like that. The conversation had taken a turn I hardly liked, but G.I.s seemed to be like B.O.R.s in one small thing: they spoke freely to welfare!

'Well, what I really wanted to spread around amongst you is to remember that when a B.O.R. wants to knock your head off, he isn't usually making a personal matter out of it; he's just bashing away at your almighty dollar. And he'll get a stiffer sentence than you will, for fighting. So it's pipe down, you Yanks,' and they grinned back at me. I treated them to a stirrup cup ice-cream soda, and we were all able to stand up and walk back to the Y.W.C.A.

Only one small snag arose next morning. I had lost my air-travel warrant. However, this wasn't a European airline with its iron-bound fussiness about tickets down or not one inch up. This was India, where human frailty was catered for. Nobody flustered me.

'Have you looked inside your beret?' suggested an interested young Staff officer bystander. It *was* in my beret; by now I had acquired many of the habits of the B.O.R.s.

The young S.O. was in the seat across the gangway.

'Your first visit to Delhi?'

'Yes! Romance! What a city to explore! The Red Fort, the Mosque with the imprint of the Prophet's very own foot, the Kashmir Gate, Hindu Rao's bungalow, the Ridge—I want to see the lot. Nicholson's statue with nothing written on it but his name! One of my great-great-greats is buried on the Ridge,

in the little cemetery. What a moment when I actually stand beside his grave! We—Aunt Katrine, that is—has a painting of him at home. He was a very bad lad, Ensign Hamish Hamilton! The S.O. was unimpressed by history.

'The Red Fort is closed to visitors; they've got the pro-Jap Nationalists locked up there. If you rub knees with the S.S.O. in the Elephant Gate, he might let you in, though,' and he grinned wickedly at me. 'The seven ruined cities of Delhi! Prophecy has it that British Raj Delhi will make the finest ruins of the lot! Better be careful, though: the last time I stopped to discuss a ruin, it nastily demanded my name and unit!'

We were getting on famously when I mentioned Dustypore.

'Are you stationed there? The Michaelis battle-axe is there. You must know her?'

'Battle-axe?' I stuttered.

'A genuine "Up, guards, and at 'em" female! What's she like? She's your boss, I suppose? She's coming up to Delhi, I'm told, and if her conversation is as juicy as her letters, she'll be mobbed. What's she like? Fair, fat and forty?'

'Well, she's very fat and fortyish, but she's not—not juicy. At least, I never thought she was. She—she speaks her mind, of course, but—'

'And what a mind that woman has!' He was looking at me with greater interest. 'Do you type her letters and et cetera?'

'Yes,' I assured him truthfully.

'Oh! And you don't think she's juicy? By the way, what are *you* coming to Delhi for, apart from the ruins?'

'I'm going to Simla with my husband, Commander Douglas. He'll be meeting me. Honestly, though, I think you've got the wrong idea about—my boss. She's only outspoken when she feels it's necessary to give Delhi a clear picture. Are you welfare? Have you read any of them? Her letters?'

'No to both. But I've *heard*! We're all waiting to see her. She's a knock-out at giving G.H.Q.(I) clear enough pictures!'

'Captain Michaelis won't be coming up to New Delhi,' I told him decidedly. 'I'm acting as a sort of deputy.'

'I'll look her up when I'm in Dustypore, then. My group moves down there for repatriation in a couple of months. . . .'

John was waiting on the tarmac. 'Stomach bearing up all right?'

'Never better, though it's a horrid moment when you swoop down and the land comes up to meet you.' Or the sea. . . .

I introduced the Staff officer. 'I lost my ticket, and he knew where it was.'

'Mrs. Douglas keeps things under her hat. It's a point to remember in emergencies, sir,' and he went off, smiling.

New Delhi was a great disappointment. I said so, as we whistled along in an open taxi. 'The streets are too wide and they look scrubbed. This isn't romance; this is hygiene.'

'The two go hand in hand often,' John comforted, 'but you can feel romantic soon. Delhi is crowded out, and my room is in an annexe of the hotel. It was built on to be a sort of model servants' quarters, but every room is let out, at forty-five shillings per day and plenty of takers! The sanitation system doesn't—doesn't yank. We'll be off in the night train, so I didn't bother changing.'

The hotel was a tremendous place, dazzling white, with green lawns and glorious flower-beds in front and striped awnings shading the windows. 'Cor stuff the Christmas cockerill! Brighton!'

'Not quite,' John pointed out. 'We go round the corner.'

A long row of whitewashed brick buildings, with the corrugated-iron roof extending in front to make an open veranda. 'Cor stone the currants! Dustypore!'

'They allow the outcasts to eat in the main dining-room. A gentleman's agreement for the forty-five shillings! We're rather late for lunch, but you'll never last out till tea-time,' so we found our way round to the dining-room.

'Can we explore this afternoon? I've got to visit great-great-uncle Hamish's grave and then the Red Fort. If we touch bare knees with the S.S.O. he'll let us in, I'm told.'

'Who told you? I'm not going to enter the Red Fort or any other fort under false pretences. I dislike the noise of bare knees banging together, Margaret, and——'

'Howcome?'

'How——? Margaret, leave Uncle Hamish and the S.S.O. alone for the moment. You'll have to make a courtesy call on your C.O. at H.Q. Better get that over first.'

'I'm on leave. I want a rest from welfare.'

'It's usual; you ought to. It won't take more than ten minutes, and I'll wait outside. I ran into your colonel yesterday, and he's expecting you.'

'Let him expect, then. I'm not going near G.H.Q.'

'Oh, aren't you?' John whistled softly. 'Out with it, my love. Where's that foot of yours been lately?'

'Nowhere special. I just don't feel like being polite to strangers.'

'Your colonel isn't exactly a stranger. Now I come to think

of it, he had a twinkle in his eye. Almost shoved me in the ribs. What have you been doing to G.H.Q.(I), sweetheart?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. Only, I had to be—rather outspoken about—something. To give them a clear picture. . . . No B.O.R. could make me blush, but John could; I kept my head low over the ice-cream sweet. But I had to eat and the ice-cream was white and made my face look even redder. He leaned his elbows on the table and waited, smiling. 'It was just—they wouldn't let a B.O.R. go home on compassionate home posting and his wife is over forty and it would be too late when he did get home.'

"Too late for what, though?"

"They both wanted to start—a—a baby."

"So do I." He leaned forward. "God, darling, so do I! So does half the army and most of the navy, if not the whole air force! But we all have to wait, Margaret."

"But he's a Regular. He's—he was at Dunkirk. Then Burma, then the Middle East. Then back to India again, and he was on a draft for Japan. He had leave after Dunkirk, but they couldn't manage it. She was—*hors de combat*, and then the misery and excitement of having him go away again. He was in poor shape, too, after those beaches. They just didn't have enough time together. You can't just say, We'll have a baby, and have a baby! Not always. The doctor sent a certificate to say she's worrying in case it would be too late when her husband did get home, and the worrying was likely to have that effect. He's come through the whole war without a scratch, which shows he's lucky; he's A.1 now and fighting fit, and the war's over. Why can't he have his baby? He deserves it. He's steady, disciplined. Britain can do with the sort of son he'll breed."

"You mentioned all these points to G.H.Q.(I)?"

"Yes, I did!" I felt quite defiant. "The whole lot! It's just simple facts of life about women, and they can't all be married men on the Compassionate Board. You have to be plain-spoken in my job, even if it makes people misjudge you. Once the thing's done, the chap's very willing to serve in Japan or anywhere else. He's not trying to beat the gun, like they said he was. You can't beat any gun when you're a Regular. . . ." I stared across the table at John and his look made my heart almost turn over.

"I'm to be the father of your sons," he began softly. "My luck was in that day I met you. . . . When does this lad go home?"

"Some time this week. I don't know the exact day, but——"

"Hurry up and eat that messy stuff. We'll call in at G.H.Q.(I)

together, then we'll take a few flowers to Uncle Hamish, and then I'll wait outside the Elephant Gate while you slobber over this S.S.Q. character. You'll have more success with your knees and I've seen the Red Fort. What's the rest' of your sight-seeing programme?'

Simla—that super, super Indian hill-station, where Eastern custom and Western habit dovetail, in the tangy, spicy air. It was all like a lovely dream, where everything stood out vividly for memory to record. We trundled about in rickshaws and we wandered for miles along the hill-paths, where the mountain-side had been split open and the upper lip forced back, to give narrow passage. The scent of the pine-trees drifted in through our windows, and once or twice, in the early mornings, the very clouds came billowing in, to shut us off from each other in a grey dampness. The hotel was built into a very precipice; only a few storeys rose above the road, the rest hung dizzily over the edge, flattening itself against the sheer rock. From our veranda we gazed across the tops of giant pines, thousands and thousands of feet into the haze below. Mentally and physically, we were on the roof of the world, with our heads amongst the clouds.

We had our favourite walk—to a ruined bungalow in a large, riotously overgrown garden.

'I think this was Old Government House, before they built the new Viceregal affair. They had plenty of room to spread themselves even on a mountain-top like this.' The place had no glass in the windows and it was boarded up, but the doors on the widest veranda, facing the sunrise, opened at the slightest push. 'The old ballroom, obviously; but don't go in, Margaret. Those wooden floors look rotten. Great times they must have had here, fifty years ago.' We never tired of that old building, exploring the stables and the primitive kitchens, set apart, thirty yards or more from the house itself. 'They sweated all the way up here in chairs or on horseback. Must have taken days to do the trip. All right for the ladies being carried, but most uncomfortable, never on an even keel in those chair things on poles. Riding side-saddle must have been even worse for them—they were sitting looking over the precipice edge all the way up. A game bunch, those old-time British women!'

I had grown to love this sailor in the six months of our disjointed friendship. Now I grew to know the man I had married, in three weeks of constant companionship. We sat, in the shade of the wide veranda steps of that old Simla bunga-

low, with broken toppling statuary and marble urns to lean against; honeysuckle and rose-bushes, unpruned for a decade, twined and knitted themselves with writhing tendrils into a solid mat of scent and colour, huddling back from the stone steps, but throwing themselves violently all over what had once been lawn and flower-bed and path. We sat, gazing into lavender-coloured nothingness where the ground fell away, and I listened to John Douglas, telling me of all that he was and ever hoped to be. Sometimes we lingered late, to marvel at the quick Indian darkness which had climbed out of the nothingness and flooded over the lavender. I felt then that behind us the windows were glowing with candle-light and that the faded sweetness of a spinet followed us out through the ruined gates. I hoped that the old bungalow would stand there for ever, crowning a hill-top, looking out to the sunrise and turning an uncaring back on the sunset.

Our hotel was not crowded, but the other guests made up parties to do this or that, to dance or to visit. They tried to bring us into their circle, but we held smilingly aloof, and they called us 'the honeymoon couple'.

'Aren't you sick of just me?' John demanded one evening when we had retreated as usual to our sitting-room, with the blazing log fire, and the faint strains of gramophone records beat in through the half-opened veranda doors.

'I have to dance and dash around generally in Dustypore, for business reasons! Here I can be at peace. We'll dance together the night before you sail, in Bombay. But—are you getting bored, with just me? Do you want to stay down there?'

'Bored? In a heaven like this?' and I was answered. He kicked the logs with his heel and sent the sparks chasing upwards.

'I must write a note to Eleanore. It's funny, isn't it? I look on her as one of my very oldest friends, but we're only likely to meet once in a blue moon. They'll be living out here, and we may be anywhere.'

John stretched out in his chair with his book on Japan; he liked to read up places he was going to, before he got there. My pen raced over the paper. 'Going to blow tonight. Hear that wind?' He went to stand out on the veranda, and I licked down the envelope and went out, too. The pine-tree tops were tossing madly below us; clouds raced in tattered strips across the thickening sky.

'There's no wind up here,' I pointed out in surprise. The flounces of my blue net dress barely fluttered, yet those tree-tops were tormented.

'We're in a pocket. She'll hit us soon and shake the place. Better get in and bar this door. When she comes, she'll scatter that fire, if we're not battened down.' He was right. 'She' hit us with hurricane force five minutes later and seemed all the more spiteful for having missed us earlier. The glass panes rattled and the doors moved on their hinges.

'The whole hotel's shaking,' I whispered.

The shredded clouds were blown down against the panes and rested for a moment thankfully before another gust flipped them up and away. I supposed aloud that the hotel would stand up to all this. 'Sure to,' said John cheerfully.

'She' blew herself out just before daybreak, and the sudden quiet after all the assorted noises sent me shivering over into John's bed. 'Are you asleep?'

I cuddled in close to his comforting warmth. How many more days before I should be alone in that hateful Dustypore? Dustypore after Simla? I wept a little and wiped my eyes on his pyjamas. 'But not your nose too; I draw the line at that,' he forbade me. 'My hanky's under the pillow.' I snuffled into his hanky.

'It's just that I've realized how much I'll miss you.'

'I won't miss you, of course. Margaret, you little darling, what shall I do without you?' He stirred and moved his arm to pull me closer. 'Do without, I suppose. Like the rest of the ship's company. And like your friends, the B.O.R.s.'

'Eleanore was in Dustypore, and I had you and Isabel and everybody in Bombay to look forward to. Now I'll have nobody.'

'It's only for a few months, little love. You wouldn't be happy if you went home, knowing you'd cleared out before the job was finished. Stick it out, and then go with a clear sheet.'

'Will you promise to think of me every moment?'

'No,' he told me flatly. 'I won't promise that. They can't use mooning lovesick asses in the navy. But I'll think of you every moment that's my own. That suit you?'

'I don't suppose I'll have so much time to think of you either. I'm going to work harder than ever. That very first night in Dustypore I heard the B.O.R.s singing that song "Show me the way to go home". I thought it was a bit out of date, but it wasn't, because that was what so many of them needed—to be shown the way to go home, before it was too late. They all want to go home eventually, of course, but most of them are like you, sensible about it. They can wait, until the time comes for a clear sheet release. But the others have to have a chance to beat the gun, to get their lives straightened out for the

future. I tell the B.O.R.s never to envy the lads who get compassionately posted home, because they've all lost something, that little band, and they won't ever get it back again.' I had once thought I had lost something, too, but I had found something, instead. Surely some of my friends the B.O.R.s would have a little of my luck? I should never know how any of these men fared, back in Civvy Street, but I could, and I would, remember them all in my prayers.

'You're doing a very nasty wartime job, Margaret. It might make some women coarse. Charles and Isabel were worried, and I wondered often enough myself. But you didn't seem to change at all. It's just made you—easy to live with.'

'I have to listen to everything the B.O.R.s tell me. I can't refuse. And some of them are nasty with me because they're so hurt and broken up inside. You said they'd bare their souls to me if I was the right kind and, if I was the right kind, I wouldn't feel insulted. No one, no one at all, except the other Families' Welfare officers, can know what it's like, to be a woman and have to sit and listen to lonely men, breaking their hearts because of their troubles at home. It heartens a whole regiment to feel there's someone they can talk to, who'll listen for hours if necessary, and who'll fight to get them home. Even when I fail, and they have to stay out here, they still seem heartened, somehow. That's why I don't care if people think I'm a battle-axe.'

'A battle-axe?' There was a comforting disbelief in John's voice. 'You don't know what a battle-axe is, obviously!' And I knew he was smiling to himself.

Days and nights of contented fulfilment; from banter to passion and back again, chuckling at ourselves. Love with a funny-bone and tolerance in its marrow.

'That blonde is signalling me, am I a gentleman?' John confided to me over the soup, the very next evening. I glanced round, and the eye was swivelled off our table. A very lovely lady this, with an off-the-shoulder gown and two American officer escorts.

'Signal back, then, quick. Don't keep her in suspense. Aren't you a gent?'

'Wot, no jealousy? I hope that pair are her twin brothers, then, and I insist you stay below and dance with your admirers for once. I can just hang around.'

'It's a good idea! I'll wait until the colonel with the moustache comes in before I cast my glad eye. There aren't any class distinctions with my colour hair.'

'Oh? All I suggested was that perhaps I've been too reserved, too—er—sparing with my favours. But if you're going to call up hairy reserves . . . ' We laughed at each other.

'She's an American, too. I heard the nut-grater accent at the desk this morning.'

'Jealousy, thank heaven, at last! But I'm not interested in her voice. All she has to say is yes or no, as occasion demands.'

'Some of these Americans can't speak their own language. I had to fall back on English, with those jeep Yanks.'

'It's always a safe plan with foreigners. Which jeep Yanks?'

'Going down to Bombay in the truck. Their jeep drew up behind us at a level-crossing, so I went back for a pow-wow. I was listening when you were teaching Nick those Red Indian war-whoops and I wanted——'

'Stick to the jeep, Margaret.'

'Well, they were just getting out, so I gave them the Sioux war-whoop—it sounded terrific—and then I followed up with the Cheyenne peace-call—you know, the one where you have to put your finger in your mouth and wobble it. Your finger, I mean. You told Nick he——'

'Stick to the jeep, Margaret.'

'Well, then, I held up my hand in the "Peace, God Bless You" sign and said, "Howdy, folks, light out and set a piece." '

'And did they?'

'Not at first; they sort of hung. So I sat down on a pile of stones at the side of the road and patted——'

'God, Margaret, never a soft couch for your lovers! Every stone and plank in India seems to lie ready to your hand. A bed like a deck in Dustypore . . . but go on.'

'I sat down and patted. They looked at me and then at each other and came out, not very fast, so I had to hurry them. "Cim-mawn, tight pants." I coaxed, all flattery and smiles, "Cim-mawn, tight pants, grease them skates of yourn' and keep a-comin'——",'

'And did they?'

'They gathered round me, chewing like cows, and I felt like a gate, only they weren't leaning on me, of course. "You British?" asked one, and I was delighted at the recognition, only he'd left out half. I helped him nicely. "You British, you presume?" I said. "You've always got to presume in darkest Africa." They looked at one another again, so I hurried up to answer, politely. "Shore am, kiddo. Gard's own countree," and then I remembered that was them, not me—they live there—and I corrected it, "I takes that there ree-mark back afore you'all knocks it down my teeth".'

'They accepted the apology, sweetheart?'

'Oh, I think so; why not? "Stap me pink, I shore am plumb loco," I told them, quite in my stride now. "Thisaway and thetaway." And one of them shifted his quid and——'

'His——? Oh. Go on, my love.'

'And he put his hands on his hips and drawled, "Sa-ay, sister, where's your unit?" So I hurried up to throw the conversation ball back and call them brothers. "Wot air you'all a' aimin' of to do unto me, brothers? You ain't got no saddles in your ole corral and I'm a'rarin' up to git, critturs."'

'God! Margaret——'

'All four of them were gaping just like proper B.O.R.s, and I wished they wouldn't, because their gum hadn't settled on top or bottom. And then all of a sudden I threw in my chips. It was that gum mostly. "You're supposed to be the gassiest nation on earth," I wisecracked gaily. "Let's hear some of it. . . ."

'And I'm still a husband, and not a widower!' marvelled John.

'Oh, they were gassy enough, once they got started. They thought at first I'd been trying to make fools of them. I hadn't got the proper nose draught to put over this Yankee back-chat. None of them had ever been in Britain, far less Cambridge, either.'

'Are you trying to tell me if they'd ever been in Cambridge they'd have picked up an Oxford accent and understood your Yankelese?'

'They broke my heart. One of them—just listen to this—one of them was a bank clerk. In Texas! A bank clerk in Texas!'

'Why not? They use money there, too, presumably. What happened after liaison had been established?'

'Nothing. The Royal Engineer was asleep over his wheel, breathing deep and snorting. The Yanks seemed anxious to wake him, but I said no, let him have his rest; the British take out in char and sleep what they don't get in pay. And then the train came along and I promised to meet them for supper. I wanted to warn them.'

'Warn them?'

'Not to annoy the B.O.R.s so much. Throwing their money around.'

'What did they say?'

'Nothing much. They think British dames ain't honest, accepting the wages and not doing the work they've been paid to do.'

'Your friends have keen insight into British home life,' nodded John approvingly. 'I'd like to have met them.'

'You may yet. They're on draft for Japan, too. I gave them your name and told them you liked Americans. If you're treating them, though, don't say "Bottoms up". They don't trust that phrase.'

'Something to do with their tight costumes, no doubt.' John laughed. 'I'll remember, if they ferret me out.'

We didn't stay after dinner, to waste time on off-the-shoulder blondes or hairy officers. Only two more nights! John filled his pipe and I curled up on the rug at his feet, with my head against his knee, and gazed into the sputtering flames. Two more nights! I knew now beyond all doubts I was just right for John. Strong, standing four-square on his own feet in a world of men, he needed someone like me, backstage. Someone very much weaker, to take up the tender slack of his nature, to lean on him, torment him sometimes, worry him occasionally, match his passion and love him always.

His pipe clicked against his teeth and the pages of his book swished over at intervals. There would be other firesides in the future; this was only the beginning.

'A penny for them, sweetheart?' He leaned forward, to shake the pipe over the fire and clear the stem.

'Oh, just you. And us.' I rubbed my cheek against his hand. His hand slipped over my hair.

'Copper gold. Warm. That blonde looked washed-out beside you. You're not really serious, talking about having it all cut off?'

'It's so hard to keep clean in Dustypore, under that tap. I could wash it properly at Isabel's, every fortnight. But now I'll never be down in Bombay. It'll grow again.'

'You'll look even younger with short hair. If you've made up your mind to it, then I want to see it before I go. There's quite a decent shop here. The chap cut mine all right.'

I hadn't quite made up my mind to it, though I felt the shampooing sessions in that cramped bathroom in Dustypore would drive me to it, sooner or later. It might as well be now, if John wanted to see the effect. 'Right! Tomorrow, I'll be shorn as well as unfrocked!'

'Don't use that word.' He took me up quite sharply. 'The troops have a different word and I prefer theirs.'

'Oh, what do they call me? Sob-sister?' But he changed the subject.

'I meant to ask, was that driver of yours really asleep?'

'How did you guess?' I smiled up at him. 'No, he wasn't, but he said the Yanks had had a basinful and they couldn't be expected to take his face as well. I taught him the war-whoop but he wouldn't bother with the peace-call. We stopped the truck twice, to let him get the proper breath control.'

'Was it wise, sweetheart, to put temptation in his way? After admonishing the other side?' I had had twinges of conscience.

'Oh, there's plenty of other Engineers in Bombay, and if he sings out "Ubique" he'll get gunner reinforcements as well.' And John put back his head and bellowed.

'They're a peaceable lot, really, the British Army,' I assured him. 'It's amazing, how they are all so different when they join up and then they seem to settle down, to discipline and discomfort and everything, and grow matey and all alike. Resigned and peaceful, until they're freed again.'

'You choose some unfortunate words. Freed again! And they're not there to be peaceful. I've known a good few not resigned either. A.B. Newman, for one.'

'What happened to him?'

'Nothing.'

'How did you know he wasn't resigned, then? Did he tell you?'

'Margaret, a sailor does not tell his commander he isn't resigned, even though in this Dustypore place a soldier seems to spare his Brigadier nothing. A.B. Newman was a very young man who didn't mind fighting for his country at all. He didn't even mind being with us—in the Navy to do it. But he had no time for naval trimmings. He made his views known widely, and the P.O.s sandpapered him accordingly. When one of them called him a pregnant duck, he took offence and wrote to his M.P. about the matter.'

'Go on, John. Was the P.O. punished?'

'Was the P.O. punished? Was the P.O. punished! By the Lord Louis, Margaret, this Dustypore must be a place! No, the P.O. was not punished.'

'Well, what did his M.P. do, then?' I was particularly anxious to know the procedure, to be ready for Harabic Herbie's M.P., if necessary.

'The M.P. wrote to me. She was a woman M.P.,' said John disgustedly, as if that explained it. 'Quote. "Whether the sailor stood out like a pregnant duck or not amongst his comrades on the decks, he should not have been told about it so rudely and publicly. A gentler phrase could have been found to correct any noticeable posture fault. I am willing to believe

that you do not encourage these unkind practices amongst your underlings, and I am therefore asking no questions in the House until I have your version of the whole lamentable episode. 'Unquote.' John sniffed inelegantly.

I was impressed. My Lords of the Admiralty would have some little difficulty explaining away the adjective applied to one of their stalwarts serving in a ship of the line!

'Well, what did happen after that? Did Newman accept an apology?'

'Newman did not *get* an apology, Margaret. I sent for A.B. Newman and read his lady M.P.'s letter out to him publicly. All I said then was, after I had looked him up and down civilly, "I can see you've laid your egg. Stay away from swimming-pools in future until you can behave yourself."'

'But he won't stop swimming just to please you?'

'No. But he did stop writing letters to lady M.P.s, just to please your husband. . . .'

My hair was shorn ~~next~~ morning. I felt naked. The long hair was parcelled up for me; I could always have it made up into a switch. The face which stared back at me from the large mirror was completely unfamiliar; saucy, gamine, with no dignity or repose about it whatsoever. The hairdresser himself, a refugee whose nationality I did not inquire into, was delighted with his handiwork. The rickshaw hurtled down the hills and the impetus carried it half-way up the opposite slopes and the wind ruffled and tumbled the short curls. I pushed little clusters out of my eyes. I did not care for this new personality very much!

John was in the cocktail bar, leaning against the counter, with a dozen other officers. The blonde American was stretched out on a long cane chair with her feet up, laughing, vivacious. She saw me first. She stared, her eyes widening.

'Why, Commander,' she said, and pointed. They all turned to the doorway, but I watched the commander. Surprise, shock and then something else—admiration and delight, were all in his eyes as he dashed over and seized my hands, parcel of hair and all.

'You look wonderful! Come and have a drink. . . .'

The blonde spread out her hands. 'All that wonderful hair! *Why?*' I told her why. 'A welfare officer? *You?*' She was unflatteringly incredulous. I had not worn uniform at all in Simla. The group of officers knew all about Families' Welfare; my colleagues had spread its name and fame the length and breadth of India Command. They felt at home immediately

in the 'presence of the blue beret' and gathered round me. I could have been back on the lawn in Dustypore, joking, talking, laughing, teasing. I even forgot John. Until his hand took away my sherry, untasted.

'Come on, Margaret, what about your flowers? They're upstairs, wilting,' but there was rather an edge to his voice. Indian flower-sellers came round every morning to each hotel room with huge baskets of flowers; for a shilling, one could buy enough to make a miniature Chelsea Flower Show.

I waved gaily and went out, hanging on to John's arm.

'American officers always seem so shy and sort of diffident. Though perhaps I haven't met enough of them really to judge. I liked those two, didn't you?' The two downstairs had seemed to stay on the fringe of everything. . .

'Nice chaps,' John agreed as he opened our door.

'Well, do you really like it short?' I demanded and whirled round on my toes, to give him a view from all angles. He stood, grimly, leaning against the door.

'I like it, all right. So will everyone else. Down there, I watched you, Margaret. That's how you are, how you will be, in—in Dustypore. Surrounded by every Tom, Dick and Harry who cares to gather round. Laughing at them, leading them on, exciting them. And by God, you don't know it, you don't see what you're doing. . . .'

It's funny how everything inside you can go all tight and yet quivery. And something scorching hot and then cold goes over your skin like a sponge.

John walked over to the veranda and stood there, staring out.

I didn't know what to do. I sat down and looked at the fire. John! As jealous as this because I had laughed with a few men I should never even see again after we left Simla!

'I'm sorry, Margaret.' His voice was quiet, behind me. 'I—would you like me to say anything else?'

'No. I think I understand how you feel.'

'I've made an ass of myself. It wasn't that crew downstairs so much. It was just—they made it seem like Dustypore all over again. That veranda of yours—there can't be a moment when some man isn't watching you on it. I watched them watching you, that night I was there. Oh, I know it's your job to mix; you can't shut yourself up like the other women. But I've got to leave you there, living rough when I want to take care of you. I trust you, but I can never be sure. Dustypore is hell to me! Can you understand?'

'I understand all right.' I rubbed my hand wearily across my

forehead, to shove back those curls. 'You forget, it's my job to understand men. I ought to, by now; I've coped with plenty of jealous men. You've—you've spoilt everything. . . .'
Bitternells stopped me.

'I can't spoil anything because I can't spoil you. But I'm glad this has happened. You'll remember this, and always be on your guard, now. You got away with it all before and no one ever overstepped, perhaps. But those curls make you look different, saucier. You won't get away with anything any more, Margaret. I'll be overseas and you look vulnerable, different. . . . You're fair game, in a man's world. . . .' He held out his arms and, when I hesitated, reached for me and pulled me close. 'Whatever you do,' he muttered thickly, 'it will make no difference. Do you hear? You're mine, Margaret, and I'll never set you free for another man. *Never!* Don't ever try. . . .'

'You needn't be jealous of Dustypore. A woman is what she wants to be, there or anywhere else, John. You'll have to trust your wife wherever you leave her. I've got to trust you, haven't I? Going ashore after months at sea? Men in uniform are twice as attractive as men in dull civvies, and you're always in uniform.'

'You can trust me,' he told me gravely. 'Amongst the very wickedest of sirens. . . . Now!'

We said our real good-bye on that veranda, high above the pines and almost on a level with the stars. Bombay did not matter, when the time came.

Chapter 18

The train drew in at midnight.

I went down the platform with the wave of B.O.R.s and was swirled with them through the doorway. Lester was waiting just outside the archway and he took my case.

'The commander sailed all right, mam?' he asked conversationally, and he helped me in without looking at me.

'Oh, yes. This afternoon,' and the door was shut.

The moon sailed high and every tree cast a shadow. The singing from the lorries echoed in gusts behind us. A dog howled inside the Gunners' Depot and the gate sentry stared hard at the car. Lights shone out from two of the verandas as we turned in through the scroll gates. Everything was as usual: dusty, greyish, in the moonlight.

Edna, in her dressing-gown, leaned over the veranda next to mine. She had moved next door, to let me come home.

'Mello,' she greeted me. 'Your "boy" is bringing tea, and Irene is coming over to claim her whack. You wait a cup, too?' she asked the colonel's driver.

'No, thanks, miss,' he grinned. 'The C.O.'s still at the Mess and I've got to collect him now.'

He carried my case into the bedroom.

'Thank you.' I hoped my smile was stronger than it felt.

'S'pleasure, mam. I . . . ' He paused awkwardly.

'Up the Buffs!' I reassured him and he went out, smiling.

The 'boy' was coming down the driveway, with the tea-tray.

'How have you been bearing up? Without the hot and cold?' I asked Edna.

'Splendidly. I never missed it! I'll swop with you any time you like. You've got them all disciplined to welfare like lambs. Wait till Dora hears what she's missed. You wouldn't care to move to Western Command, I suppose?'

'Not at this very moment,' I laughed. 'Salaam, boy. Captain Memsahib coming now?'

'*Memsahib hai* . . . ' Irene was running down the path, waving.

'Margaret,' she said quietly and kissed me. 'But what have you done to your hair?'

'Oh.' I had forgotten my shorn locks. 'It's off, like the commander.' But it wasn't a very good joke. I must try harder.

'No more breakfasts in bed at the ungodly hour of eight! The bugles and Run will soon cure me of all bad habits. Don't tell me Dora likes bugles!'

'Run——' began Edna and paused, looking at Irene. Irene stared across at the lawn. 'I'm sorry, Margaret, but you see Run and—and Tip have—gone. . . .'

'Home? You mean the sergeant's been repatriated?' It was a bit of a blow. 'Oh, well, I'm glad he managed to take them with him, though I'll miss them. He didn't mention they'd all be gone when I got back. I expect he forgot to tell me.'

'He didn't forget, Margaret. He just thought—you'd rather not know. He didn't want to spoil your leave.'

'Oh, I see.' It was rather nice of the sergeant, really. One of the few things I had been looking forward to in Dustypore was shaking Run's little hand and feeding him the nuts John and I had bought specially for him. 'Tip will be all right, but Run may feel the cold at home. He'll have his little cholera belt with him, though.'

'They haven't gone home.' Irene Bannister took over,

trying to sound brisk and breezy. 'The sergeant was unlucky in the draw for free pets' passages. He didn't want to tell you, because he knew you couldn't do a thing about it. He couldn't—just leave them behind. You know how it is, Margaret, with all these pets. Passed from hand to hand, as each new master is due for repat. That pair wouldn't have settled with new masters, anyway. It was bad enough with you. Run looked everywhere for you, and I swear he told Tip you'd deserted them because Tip wouldn't come near this room.'

'What did happen to them?' I asked with stiff lips. But I knew. Run would be sitting on the sergeant's shoulder with an affectionate little arm round the sergeant's neck and the big dog would be trotting obediently at the sergeant's heels when they went for their evening walk, as usual. Their last evening walk. To the vet's.

'He left this little parcel for you,' and Edna brought it out of her dressing-gown pocket. I knew what was in it. 'The little cholera belt.

The planks were just as hard; like sleeping on the deck. 'I can't stay up on deck all night, but I'll stay up as long as I can. To look back across the sea. Sweetheart wife . . .'

Edna Leveritt had cause to remember her last night in Dustypore hotel. A weeping colleague on one side and on the other side a drunken officer who sang 'I'm the las-sh ro-osh of shummer . . . a—a—bloomin' all alone. . . .'

Chapter 19

The plague came very quietly to Dustypore.

Irene and I had been to the cinema that evening. We had hoped to go alone but, as usual, escorts tacked on.

'This feeling of always being hemmed in by men! The times we've tried a firm "No" and found ourselves being helped into *tongas* afterwards. It's a pity we haven't got Maria Shoemantle's strength of mind. Her "No" wouldn't land her in *tongas*.'

'Her "Yes" mightn't either.' Irene was placid, as usual. 'And I'm sure her colonel would agree.'

The escort party had gone ahead walking and our *tonga* ambled along with the little bells jingling and the driver calling out the Hindi version of 'Mind your backs, please'. The roads were thronged with B.O.R.s all on their way to the pictures, too. They made way cheerily for us, overflowing into the ditches on either side.

Dustypore had two cinemas; one on the outskirts for the outlying camps, the other right amidships. A model dairy-farm would have hesitated to store manure in either building. In the monsoon there was little difference between sitting outside in the rain and sitting inside in the rain, except for the screen itself. The management provided large umbrellas for the comfort of their lady patrons in emergencies, and the customers in the rows behind raised no objections. In fact, male escorts rather fancied the umbrella idea all the year round, in Dustypore, where private love-making provoked candid criticism and greater interest than anything shown on the silver screen. The seats downstairs were priced at fourpence; the balcony, reached by an outside wooden staircase, housed the *élite* at eightpence apiece. It was understood that while no officer could stoop to fourpennyworth, the B.O.R.s could rise to the eightpennies. They did, when they had a W.A.C.(I) prize in tow and were fending off brother pirates. The films were changed each night, a lavish-sounding scheme which only meant that we had a choice of spread-out evenings to see the same set of films. Tom Mix, his horse Tony, Charlie Chaplin with his Edna, Mary Pickford and the Mack Sennett comedies, Fatty Arbuckle, Buster Keaton and Pola Negri all jerked across the screen in silent byplay. The B.O.R.s could go happily back to their childhood days, eating bananas, sucking oranges and supplying their own words when the script provided was considered inadequate.

Anything could happen, and it usually did. The Indian operator was all thumbs when it came to handling the new-fangled talkies. The screen voices did something to him, or probably his projector was unprepared for modern trends. The Hedy Lamarr film always ended in frustration for the troops and their officers, and Hedy was their favourite. We would be watching her in a passionate clinch which brought out the sweat-beads on the devoted foreheads of her audience, when click! wild whirling circles on the screen would bring the whole house to its feet, groaning and roaring. One could almost imagine the little operator dashing madly to and fro in his tiny room, throwing hunted glances down at the baying pack, Hedy winding in thin spirals round his loin-cloth. He probably had a frantic shot at make-do and mend, but the shouted instructions which came like clouts on the ear through the square hole in the wall would have confused the seven wise men. By the time the troops were at the singing of their hymn 'O, why are we waiting?' to the tune of 'O come, all ye faithful', he must have been doing the rope-trick up Hedy. The Indian

manager often had to make a personal appearance on the stage, his writhing arms and features making dramatic bids for peace in the fourpennies and goodwill in the eightpennies. No one in Dustypore was ever able to speak with authority on what happened to Hedy on that couch of passion, though most of us had paid our money a score of times and more, in high hopes. If Hedy came back to us at all, on the same evening, she arrived either in a motor car, fleeing, or in a different costume, not at bay. The troops, settling back, spoke their fears audibly.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs had been with us for some several weeks, and already Commander Roff of the W.A.C.(I) had made a personal appeal to the manager of the cinema to give Walt Disney's fairy-tale a well-earned rest. 'Welfare will have to support me,' she smiled, sitting on my office table swinging her leg. 'The whole thing is—is——' She gave up. 'Have you seen them? Whenever one of my girls walks along a road now, these characters form up into bands of seven and—and advance, in single file, singing. It's harmless enough but——!' I nodded. The W.A.C.(I) were not all Snow Whites and we weren't referring to their morals.

'They'll keep it up as long as the girls turn and run. Order them all to sit down with arms crossed or just—just stand their ground, when these dwarfs get going. That should put the lads in a fix.'

'Should it?' asked Mabel Roff, grimly. 'You haven't seen the film. There's a Prince Charming running round loose in it, too. It's his special duty to get Snow White on her feet again, with a kiss. If my girls just stand or sit, waiting . . .'

'This film tonight,' Irene was informing me, 'concerns a bleak-faced chap called William S. Hart. It's a new film, just arrived. The name sounds rather familiar, somehow.'

'He must be a new film discovery. I like them bleak-faced and not crooning, myself. What's the "S" in the middle for?'

'The troops will tell you. Especially if they don't take to him. They're not fond of bleak faces in their off-hours!'

The house was rising for the National Anthem when the notice was flashed on the screen.

ALL RANKS WILL LEAVE CINEMA BY REAR DOOR AT
LEFT SIDE. BALCONY WILL REMAIN SEATED UNTIL
LOWER FLOOR HAS BEEN CLEARED.

'Oo's pinched wot?' the lower floor wanted to know jocularly, but, as the orderly queues formed, another word began as a whisper and echoed through the ranks.

'Plague!'

'It's the plague!'

'Dustypore's got the plague!'

Three military policemen stood at the foot of the rickety wooden staircase. 'Report back to hospital at once,' the M.P. captain told the three nurses in front of us. 'There's a truck over there.' The nurses ran.

'Inoculation for all ranks. No, the plague's not in Dustypore, but there are cases in the Indian village. Bazaar is out of bounds. Have you got transport?' He was looking at Irene and me, attired in cotton housecoats. 'All the *tongas* have been sent outside. If you wait until I've cleared all this lot, I'll take you home myself.'

There was something sinister about that word, plague. It looked sinister written down. It felt more than sinister when one had to stay put, within its very shadow.

Dustypore was unhappily situated not too many miles distant from a very holy Indian city, which shared the plateau with us. Pilgrims from all corners of India came to pay their respects to the gods in the huge temple and to wash their sins and sores away in the sacred river which almost encircled the outer walls. Epidemics were a commonplace in that holy city, and the doctor fraternity in Dustypore was never really at ease. The place was out of bounds to all ranks, but officers could sometimes make day trips there if they got a special M.P. permit and duly reported their safe arrival back in cantonments to the Provost Marshal. The B.O.R.s were officially forbidden all contact with the place, but some of them, for certain purposes of their own, ignored their Brigadier's wishes. Military police patrols made frequent surprise visits, usually at night, to round up these free-thinkers and escort them back to the fold.

One such raid had been in full cry the previous evening.

An M.P. driver, sitting in his truck outside a certain house of 'pleasure', had been waiting for the truants to be fetched out and stowed aboard. Idly, he had watched an Indian woman hurrying along the deserted, narrow lane towards him. It had been bright moonlight, but she had kept to the shadows where she could. There had been uproar in the house outside which he waited. Any moment now the first of the truants would be forcibly brought out. The woman had run the last few yards and peered up into the cab.

'You are from the British camp at Dustypore?' she had asked, in what the driver declared afterwards to be a 'posh' voice. Surprise had kept him dumb until she had repeated the question, anxiously.

'Yes, miss,' he had said, then.

'Oh, thank you, thank you. Will you please do something for me?' She had laid her hand against the door and gazed up at him, appealingly. He had thought she was crying but could not be sure, as her face was in shadow and almost hidden by the folds of her sari.

'If I can, miss.' He had been doubtful what service she could want from him, this native who spoke better English than he did himself.

'Please give this letter to your padre. The Church of England padre. Will you, please? And don't tell anyone else. Oh, will you, *please* promise me?' She had held up a paper, and he had taken it. But he had had no chance to examine it—she had still been holding out her hand. He had found himself shaking it, his own hand very firmly held. 'God bless you, lad,' she had said and muttered something else about 'home'. Then she had gone, back into the shadows.

Stupefied, he had climbed down from his cab and watched her, her ragged sari fluttering each time she passed through a patch of moonlight. She had reached the far corner of the lane and paused, to stand looking back for a few moments, and then her hand had come up in a queer little gesture, 'as if she were saying "Well, so long" to me,' reported the driver.

He had opened the paper and had seen, by the light of his headlamps, that it was covered with writing in English. But there had been no time to study it further. One of his mates had burst out of the doorway behind him, holding an enraged B.O.R. firmly round the waist and encouraging his progress by knee-kicks from behind. There had been no time after that to read papers or even think of strange native women. He had nursed a badly bruised shin and a cut lip all the way back to Dustypore. The truants were doughty fighters, always, and usually full of toddy (fermented juice of palm nuts).

'I read it all, sir, begging your pardon. To see what she was up to, sending letters to you this way, when she could have posted it as quick,' he had told the padre when he handed it over this morning. He could give no description of the woman except 'she was skinny like most of that sort' and 'her sari was torn a lot, but it looked clean enough and she hadn't smelt, even close up, like most of them.' But 'her skin wasn't right white; it looked brownish. If it had been right white, I would have detained her; a white woman's got no business in that hell hole.' Finally, 'Could I drive you, sir, when you go in?'

The padre brought the paper in to show me. He told me the

story, as he had heard it. The paper was brown and coarse—wrapping paper, it looked like—but the writing, in pencil, was in a beautifully formed hand.

MY DEAR PADRE, What bitter vanity is it in us that makes us keep silent so long and then speak, when it were better, perhaps, to keep silent? Ten years and two months and now the longing to speak just once to a minister of my own faith has broken my sworn vow. I married an Indian and I took his faith with my marriage vows. His family would not accept me when he brought me out here. I do not blame them, he had already been betrothed to a girl chosen by them. We did not starve at first. We had a little money and my husband earned ninety rupees a month (nearly £7) as a clerk. The English wife of an Indian clerk! I was not welcome anywhere, in his world or my own. I had lowered myself and when I did not get pity I got far worse, contempt. My pride would suffer neither. I loved my husband. [The paper was almost torn here where words had been roughly erased.] '... the holy city. Here I need not fear to meet my own countrywomen. There are no memsahibs here, or sahibs. Thank God, padre, I have no children. My husband would forgive me much for a son, but I take care, padre, I have always taken care. Long since I told my parents that I was happy, too happy in my new life to want to keep in touch with the old. Do they still think of me or are they dead? My husband has forbidden me to write; he hates everything English with a bitter hatred, but I must write. I am writing. Oh, God, God, padre, I . . . [There was no paper here, just a jagged hole.] . . . any hope or intention of taking me back with you. It is too late for that. Come only to hear my prayers and to say a blessing, if you can bless one like me. I trust you. The plague is in the city, but it has been here before and it will come again. You will find me in the third street on the right from the temple steps. Ask for the white coolie.

I read it through. Then I read it again.

'The white coolie,' I repeated aloud, and thought of the curving red streams of betel juice, the loin-cloths, filthy and scanty, and the outsize turbans. The coolie class, the lowest class of all, who could earn only a few shillings from the sahibs and would earn even less in that holy city.

The padre nodded. 'Will you come with me tomorrow?'
'She doesn't want any memsahibs. She would hate that.'

'She won't mind you. None of us mind you. She'll be glad to see you.' Fifteen words, one for each month of my welfare service—sweet and ample repayment, surely. 'I'll get the permits and call for you here, about nine. There's been no plague notified from the holy city, so they won't stop us going.'

'I'm going with Padre Burke to the holy city tomorrow, for a very special purpose,' I mentioned to the M.P. captain as he drove Irene and me back to the hotel, from the cinema. 'They'll give us a permit, won't they? We could go in the quarantine ward as soon as we get back. I won't mind, and neither will the padre.'

'You haven't got a hope! The Provost Marshal wouldn't issue a permit to St. Gabriel himself, now. That place will be a stink-pot of plague within the week. It's got a hold. They've been a bit behindhand telling us.'

Dustypore barred its gates. The two cinemas were closed. Armed guards kept watch at every road and lane leading into the cantonments. Long lines of B.O.R.s queued for inoculation at every M.I. room. The rat squads got busy. The rats were the danger, the only known loophole for infection to creep in amongst us; they were plague-carriers and they could not be challenged at road barriers.

The squad which cleared out the hotel premises had a monstrous haul. The pile stood waist high, as the men began to shovel the greyish bodies into the sanitation carts for burning. I stood watching after lunch and the sergeant of the squad took off his mask, to wipe his red, streaming face. 'Make a nice drop of fur coat, them skins would,' he remarked. There was something quite cold-blooded about army sergeants.

Not every rat could be caught and sacrificed. Dustypore watched anxiously for rat-falls, that moment when the carrier itself succumbs and the plague fleas leave the cooling body, for warmth elsewhere.

The holy city became a hell; the Indian village was decimated; the bazaar went under. The plague dead were burned on huge funereal pyres beside the little stream, an offshoot of the sacred river. By day, the smoke from the fires hung thickly billowing; by night, the flames roared redly. When the wind blew from the village, it carried a ghastly stench. All official functions were cancelled. All Bombay leave was stopped. But that no longer mattered to me.

There was a lull in repatriation around this time, a time-lag in the shipping programme. The group mustered next for the boat grew jumpy with the suspense. 'Pipped on the very

post, that's what we'll be,' joked the B.O.R.s, but their eyes were anxious. If one plague case developed amongst those *bashas* and tents, others would swiftly follow in a widening swathe of dreadful death.

Only one camp stood outside the guarded circle. Newly built, it lay on the other side of the village. The only trafficable road to it wound right through both bazaar and village; but a narrow, rutted bullock-cart track, stony and uneven, struck off the main road to the left, just before it entered the bazaar. This track skirted the outer fringe of the village, crossed the bed of the little stream and rejoined the main road well to the rear of the bazaar. Traffic between Dustypore and the new camp had to use this lane, the heavy army trucks bouncing and rattling and fording the almost dried-up stream like the covered waggons of Old America. Orders were clear and concise. Each convoy of trucks was to go straight through without stopping for any reason whatsoever except breakdowns. Single trucks were timed, and breakdown gangs stood ready on both sides, to dash to the relief should there be a mishap. The Royal Engineers were on their toes; they overhauled if any wheel tried to squeak.

It was more convenient for Irene and me to visit this camp than to send groups of B.O.R.s over to Dustypore. We each paid a weekly visit, on different days, she collecting my cases as well as her own on her day, and vice versa. The arrangement was allowed to stand all through the plague days. It was a legitimate hazard of welfare.

I went light-heartedly enough, until one morning.

No convoy was due to go, so the truck travelled solo. The driver had a boil on the back of his neck, where his collar rubbed. I sympathized fully. By now I had an almost permanent sore on the back of my own neck; the *dhobi* took particular pains about stiffening collars. They folded over in a razor edge.

'The *basha* says I look like plague,' he grinned.

'The *basha* shouldn't joke,' I said severely and told him about the sergeant's fur coat. He was interested.

'There's a chap in the next *basha* who's in the fur trade in Civvy Street. He'll do it for you, mam.'

I sighed. I must have shared my 'suite' with a good proportion of that grey mound. I had no fancy to take them back to civil life with me, in any guise whatsoever. 'The rats are burned now'—this to close the subject.

'The suspect plague ones is, but there'll be a lot more coming on. Our rat-squad will hunt about for you. They'll be pleased

to, .mam.' I was sure they would. Our friends the B.O.R.s and their officers put themselves to a lot of trouble to do things for Irene and me. I doubted if she would fancy a 'nice drop of fur coat' any more than I did. She had not even fancied any lunch, when she had set eyes on the mound. I must remember to tell her about 'the lot more coming on'.

'A grey fur coat would make me look on the dumpy side,' I explained, refusing the offer tactfully. 'Thank the furrier and the rat-squad, though. It was a kind thought.'

'Righteeoh!' Then he burst out laughing. 'I can't do that, mam. They don't know they're doing it, yet.' So we both laughed, as the truck bounced along.

The lane, at the turning point of the arc, passed through the outermost street of the village. Plague had cleared it, and every other street we could glimpse, of all life. No scratching dogs lying flea-bitten in the dust; no scraggy hens to run, frantically squawking, alongside the wheels; no saggy-bodied pigs rooting about in the gutters; no sacred cows or stolid buffaloes to pace unheedingly in the very centre of the lane and slow us to a crawl; no naked children to chant shrilly after us; no women to stand gracefully poised, brass pots on head, as they gossiped. All the things which brought an Indian village to noisy, squalid, colourful life were gone, sucked into the red flames of the plague fires.

The lean-to wood and straw shanties, the huts of corrugated iron and flattened-out petrol tins, the two-storey mud-brick houses, all stood quietly desolate in the glare of the sunlight, casting an uneasy sort of shade, as if they waited for one last giant's clap of triumph to shake them down into utter ruin.

'I wanted to tell the wife about all this—what it's like—but I couldn't describe it plain. Everything here's just laying around.'

I was rummaging in my shoulder-bag for some peppermints when a loud oath from the driver brought my head up again sharply. The brakes jarred and the truck stopped with a jerk which threw me crashing against the windscreen. I slithered back on to the seat and held my nose, now streaming with blood, as I watched him, sweat running down his brow and dripping off his chin, kicking furiously in an attempt to restart the engine. Blasphemy poured from his mouth as he struggled. I peered through the windscreen, but everything dimmed and danced, my eyes were still swimming from the crack on the nose. The engine roared into life and the truck lurched back, lurched again and yet again, until a crash behind jarred it as we struck a brick wall.

I had seen it, too, now.

A figure, on its knees in the dust, crawling after the truck, trying to struggle to its feet. Stark naked, with dreadful hair tangled on its shoulders and a blaze of teeth flashing in the sun where the lips were drawn back to the ears. It stood and wavered a few feet from the bonnet and, as long as I lived, I should always see it. A figure so emaciated, it looked like a soiled pipe-cleaner twisted into human shape. It fell again on its back and the legs stretched out, jerking in spasmodic rhythm.

We understood, then.

The driver groaned and groaned, horribly, at my side. Giddy, light-headed and shocked, I just sat, and mechanically wrung my hanky, soaking with blood, over the side, without taking my eyes off that figure.

It was a woman, and she had the plague. She got on to her knees again, then on to her feet, and where she had lain, the dust was mud. Her hands were clawed to the radiator cap, desperately holding on, but her body sank down, hidden.

'C——, I'm getting out,' but even as he moved, the dreadful head came up over the bonnet. One eye, rubbed out in that last tortured effort, hung now with the straggled hair and her cheekbone flared red.

Horror held us rigid.

White teeth grimaced at us, then the body faded back and dropped with a soft plop, sending up a spray of dust. One hand fluttered out, in a little gesture towards the truck, then it fell too. . . . The dust settled slowly back. The first fly crawled.

The driver slumped behind his wheel and he was saying the Lord's Prayer, his head in his hands, over the spokes. Men go back to their mothers' knees and what they learned there.

He raised his head and turned it round, as if it were on a spring which would snap. I think he was asking 'Are you hurt?' but only his jaws worked. My nose had stopped bleeding, but the blood, drying fast, prickled and tightened the skin round my mouth.

'Did we run her over? Too?' I asked. I had to know that—it seemed to assume tremendous importance.

'She came out of that hut with the flower-pot, there. All jerking—and—and—I was pulled up, in time.' He rubbed the spokes of the driving-wheel hard, mechanically. 'So that's this plague. . . .'

We both sat. Stupidly, I was waiting for that figure to get up and give the age-old greeting of the East, 'Salaam, mem-sahib.'

'I'd better get out. Just to make sure . . . ' But my head cleared and I grabbed hastily at his shirt.

'No! You can't—she—you're not to touch her. No! She's dead. We didn't do anything—for her—before and—oh, can't you see—those flies? . . . It's too late now.'

He protested, but he knew as well as I did that there was no doubt. There was no life there. Death has its own peculiar stillness. So the driver obeyed. I was an officer. But his contemptuous look said, 'and you're a woman yourself and supposed to be welfare'.

He obeyed again, when I gave the second order.

He had brought his truck forward with a crash of bricks from the broken house wall, but there was no room to pass that silent figure. Backing and manœuvring, he had handled the big vehicle like a jeep. But still there was no room to pass. He had gnawed his knuckles, looked over the side and tried again and again, forward and back.

I said quietly at last, 'Straight over, please, driver.'

'My God, mam, not over—over *that*?'

'The wheels will miss her if you keep in the centre. But drive on, please drive *on*. . . .'

'If you'd just let me move *her*, drag her inside, decent. . . .?' he pleaded. But this was plague.

We did not breathe; we were listening, feeling for any bump with every nerve in our bodies as the truck passed over. The driver pulled up. 'I don't want to look, mam. . . .'

I looked over the side and back. Nothing could hurt *her* any more. 'You cleared her,' and his breath came out in a long, long sigh.

The relief truck was tearing madly towards us with its dust tail flying high when I spoke again. 'We hadn't any water, or medicines or brandy. It was too late anyway. All we could have done was—shot her like—like an animal in pain. And there wasn't even time for that. . . .'

We returned along that quiet street in the late afternoon, in convoy. The westering sun breathed a soft golden glow on the shabby walls but I felt as if each humble building knew me and kept their very shadows turned away from me. As we passed that hut with the broken flower-pot, the driver spoke.

'I was talking to a R.A.M.C. chap. He was in the squad which came to—to shovel—*her*. "You're a b—— fool, you are," he says; "if you hadn't copped a packet of plague, you'd have had a basin of court-martial." The village has been cleared and fumigated once, but they'll have to do it again now. They don't know where she came from.' He cleared his throat hard.

'So you were quite right, mam.' But neither he nor I felt vindicated; we felt ashamed.

I wrote to Eleanore about it. '... and perhaps I was scared of catching it myself. Once you've seen what it can do. But it wasn't only me, there's thousands of them waiting to be repatriated, and they've been out here years and all their wives waiting at home. I'd have been the one to get them pipped on the post, as they call it. It wouldn't have been a very heroic gesture to fill the little cemetery. But I'm miserable about it. If she hadn't died, what would I have done then? I don't know, Eleanore, I just don't know. . . .'

The welfare officer, who thought she knew her duty, had not even passed by on the other side; she had driven right over. And was glad, in her sneaking, secret soul, that there had been no other decisions to make.

Chapter 20

The plague god was propitiated at last. 'So my 'boy' told me one morning. The Indian women in the servants' quarters wore sweet-smelling white jasmine flowers in their sleek, coiled hair that day. Little white flowers of purity!

The two military policemen, escorting a 'cells' to my office in the afternoon, confirmed the news, though in different words. The guards would be lifted from all roads the very next day. The *tongas* with their cheery bells and wearily trotting little horses would be back with us again. Dustypore had missed those shabby carriages.

The 'cells' was surly when he was brought in.

All the C.O.s had agreed that bad lads with welfare troubles could be interviewed at the office and even wear their boots throughout. They were hardly likely to start kicking out at me. They came under escort, of course, but even that was better than having a 'heart-to-heart' in a guard-room or cell.

'Reporting with prisoner Private Lee, mam.'

'Sit down, Lee,' and I waved him to the interview chair. He sat, staring morosely at the floor. Most of the M.P.s were crossword fans. I kept a special supply, cut from home newspapers, for them when they came as escorts. I handed two out now. 'One of you had better sit in the back room and make the tea when the kettle boils.' This making tea business was no habit of mine; the British Army could have floated itself home on the amount of char drunk in Dustypore alone and the

strength of the brew would have held them up. I always had a tea-party with a 'cells', though. Even when thoroughly deserved, cells were not pleasant abodes in the Indian climate, and the greatest scamp reacted favourably to a cup of tea with a slice of plum cake.

'Now, Private Lee, tell me all about it.'

'It's the wife. She's playing me up.' He had married an A.T.S. girl. His wife had written daily letters at first, then twice weekly, then once a week, and a lot of what he called the 'love-dovey' stuff had gone out of the pages. He had ticked her off, and she had replied in kind and, after a session of back-biting letters, she had stopped writing for a time. Lee had asked his mother to take some action on his behalf. 'She's sulking,' that lady had duly reported. Lee had given his wife more pieces of his mind after that. 'She's running round with soldiers; I passed her in the High Street one afternoon with a tall chap,' wrote Mrs. Lee, senior. Her son had decided this was reason enough for drowning his grievances and he had been disorderly into the bargain.

'May I see your wife's photo?' He had torn it up. 'Not the one taken on your wedding-day, surely?' No, not that one—that one was at the very bottom of his kitbag. One of the M.P.s made a special trip in next morning to bring this photo for my inspection. Nice enough chaps, these military policemen, as a rule, and the widespread B.O.R. belief in their lack of birth certificates was based on very slight grounds. This particular M.P. grinned as he handed the photo over. 'Purty piece of sugar, mam; but he wants it straight back.'

Private Lee spoke bitterly of the A.T.S. as a whole. Officers' ground-sheets, he called them, though his wife was not even trying to better herself; any soldier was good enough for her.

'Did she permit any intimacy before you were married?'

'Not her,' and Private Lee was more bitter still over this, apparently. 'Proper snorty, she was, every time I mentioned it.'

'Yet you think she's the sort to misbehave now? If she walks down the High Street in the afternoon with a soldier, that's sure proof she must be misbehaving?'

'I know what soldiers are up to, mam.'

'You ought to, certainly. You tried your best before you were married. What makes you think they're all like you?'

He shuffled his feet. 'My mates and I get talking, and they say that once a woman is married, she's easier, like a horse.'

'Like a horse?'

'Once a horse has been down,' he explained simply.

The M.P. by the door, busy with his crossword, had looked up when horses came into the affair. Escorts were firmly discouraged from taking any part in interviews; they were present, and that was all that was required of them. But horses! 'He means that when a horse has fallen once, it will fall again, mam.'

'Oh! Well, next time you discuss your wife with your mates, just remind them that mares are surer-footed.' I hoped this was true. It sounded likely enough. The two males accepted it as gospel.

'Do your wife's relations live in the town?' No, she was just stationed there. 'Does your mother invite her home?' No, his mum didn't like the Welsh. 'That's unfortunate. Now, Private Lee, do you love this wife of yours?' He gripped his bare knees hard and his look was answer enough.

'I see. Now, you're behaving like an infant. It takes some doing to keep up this lovey-dovey stuff day in and day out. Once this tiff has been settled, she may be extra loving or she may not. That's the way it is with women. You can have more rows and keep on getting drunk. Or you can take it quietly, leave your mother out of it and keep on writing regularly yourself. That's the *manly* thing to do. If you don't keep your mother out of your affairs when you're demobbed, you're going to be sorry. Especially as she seems to be going out of her way to snub your wife now. I expect your wife already thinks you're a mother's boy, and perhaps that's what's making her fed up. We'll contact your wife, your mother and your wife's C.O. Just to make sure she's doing nothing silly on the strength of your nonsense. She can get drunk and disorderly, as well as you.' A thought which made Private Lee clench his fists. 'Now, why not write to your wife and your mother and tell them you got drunk because you were so upset, and you've landed yourself in cells?'

He wrote both letters at my dictation, there and then. Decent women, be they wives or mothers, don't like their menfolk to get drunk. Private Lee had no more trouble with his pair.

'I've got our permits.' Padre Burke came in, as prisoner and escorts went out. 'Is there a cuppie left in that teapot?'

We took the road to the holy city next morning. The usual dust, the usual smells, as we drove through the gateway set in the thick, high walls. Naked pilgrims immersed themselves in the sacred waters of the river, now mere shallow trickles between deep pools. The narrow streets swarmed with the gaudy humanity of the East. This did not seem a city where

plague had dwelt long and rotted its slow passage through street after street. We left the jeep at the temple steps. As I jumped out the driver, the M.P. who had seen the White Coolie, handed me a small bundle.

'The C.O. gave most of it,' he told me simply. 'It's for her.'

The padre and I walked along the burning hot, uneven roadway. I also had brought a parcel; not money but just 'things'. 'Things' I felt I would miss and like to have if I were the White Coolie. We counted carefully, one, two, three, and turned in at the third opening. It was a narrow alley with an open drain. The walls, tumbling forward on either side, held in the heat and made the place an oven; a dirty oven where old spillings sizzle and stink afresh.

'The White Coolie?' 'The *White* Coolie?' '*The White Coolie?*' Dull, apathetic stares or grinning headshakes were our answer until the sweetmeat-seller, squatting in a doorway, beckoned to us. The basket of sweetmeats lay on the ground beside him, sticky, grisly lumps with flies alighting and taking off in horrid mimicry of a miniature air terminal. He knew her—had known her, rather.

The padre, whose Hindustani was quite good, listened to the tale, asking a question now and then. I waited in the background, a short distance away from that basket. The sweetmeat-seller was being both helpful and kind, and he had feelings which might be hurt like everyone else.

'She's dead,' said Padre Burke, turning to me at last. 'We're too late. She died of plague.' His face reminded me of something. I recalled, later, what that something was. It was the look on another man's face, as he had waited to hear if he had injured a dead woman's body.

We stood together in the doorway of the home where our countrywoman had lived so horribly and died so dreadfully. Just one small room, with stained walls and a hard-packed earthen floor. Already it had been taken over, and the Indian family stared stonily at us, as they squatted on the floor. We backed out, two white intruders, coughing with the acrid smoke of the dung-cake fire. The only window was iron-barred and paneless. There was nothing there of her, nothing at all. She had escaped with her little flame of bitter pride still alight.

We paid a formal visit to the police station.

Yes, they knew of a white coolie woman; she had fiercely discouraged their inquiries. She would not listen to offers of help from them and wanted no help from the sahibs either. So they had left her alone. 'She lived and she worked where

she could, and she only drank toddy when the Big Festival was at its height. Yes, then, indeed, she drank heavily and laughed madly and fought often, but we did not arrest her. She was of the Sahib Log, after all.'

'Did—she go quickly?' The inspector shrugged. 'I mean, was she identified?'

He shrugged again.

'There were two thousand, memsahib, in one week, in that place, round the temple steps. Identification?' He made a gesture with his hands. 'They were taken! And they were burned!'

'Her husband?' Another shrug. 'There is no hope, then?'

'None.' The tone was flat, but the Indian inspector had not been happy while he talked. He added, 'as we shook hands in parting, 'Memsahib, sahib, we only did as she wished us.'

'Thank you. We know you did.'

The jeep stood, dwarfed to toy size, at the foot of the great sweep of temple steps. The driver, eyeing the silent, gaping crowd around him with moody dislike, sprang eagerly to meet us. I pushed the rupee notes back into his hand.

'Plague. Too late.'

None of us cared to speak again until the jeep drew up outside my office. In fact, we did not speak then, either.

The package of 'things' still lay on my chest of drawers that evening as I pressed the cream slipper satin evening gown with the heavy charcoal iron. Tonight I was dining with a colonel and his lady. The social circles closed to a flight lieutenant's widow were opened now to a naval commander's wife.

I would much rather have stayed quietly at home, but perhaps it would be better to make the effort to go out and be pleasant about it. The laughter from the lawn would have grated.

Ironing was a sticky chore in tropical heat with a heavy, red-hot, charcoal-filled iron. The rough stone floor hurt my knees, but I had to use the floor; the table was too small.

Something slid across the shiny satin—something as grey as the stone underneath. A rat! I leapt after it. It wasn't going to be allowed to do any rat-fall on my premises. In Britain I cowered away from the very smallest mouse, but in Dustypore I could chase a monster rat with the best. It's the climate does it, as my friends the B.O.R.s said of this or that!

The rat lay in the driveway, kicking feebly. But it wasn't a rat-fall; just the effects of the poison the hotel manager now ostentatiously lavished on every likely and unlikely rat-haunt.

Irene had found three stiff bodies stretched out round her water-pail the day before. They had wanted a drink, to quench the burning poison inside them.

The lawn despatched the creature swiftly, and it was shovelled off to stoke the cookhouse fire. Fish fried on roasting rat! I went back into the bedroom, glad to think I was dining out, after all.

The slipper satin skirt was smouldering, I had left the huge iron flat on it. The scorched piece of material fell out as I lifted the dress. It was hopeless pinning the skirt this way or that way, in an attempt to hide the hole. I almost wept. Nothing to wear! The brown taffeta, still bearing up nobly, was being cleaned for the umpteenth time in Bombay. Its partner, a black lace, had long since mouldered into shreds. Isabel had given me two trousseau evening gowns, but they were not for Dustypore. They had too many Simla memories, of John's big hands clumsily attempting to tie a sash, of his lips wandering across my bare back and coming up to meet my own, as I turned and the passion of married love had swept over us both. 'And that's my favourite wife in my favourite dress,' he had said, the first time I had worn the midnight blue lace. 'You're everything sweet in this world gathered into a gown like an evening sky. . . .' No, they were not for Dustypore, and I had smoothed their rustling whispers of a man and his love into the uniform trunk. . . .

The colonel's car drew up outside. Irene, grey-haired and elegant in black moire, leaned out. 'Now don't say you've forgotten,' she accused, eyeing my uniform. When she saw the slipper satin, she groaned. 'Oh, what a pity! Can't we do anything with it?'

'Not a thing. I've tried. And I've nothing else handy.'

'Oh, well, you should worry. If I looked like you in khaki drill, I'd wear nothing else. Come on in.'

'S'right,' agreed the colonel's driver, a sympathetic spectator. 'Smashing!' With two comforters like this, I climbed in, smiling.

'I can explain to Mrs. Glendint. Make a joke of it, say we're not supposed to dress in civvies in case we inflame anybody.'

'I'm past the age for inflammation, thank God,' Irene declared. 'Unless Dustypore sherry brings on gout.'

The dinner-party guests were assembled on the front veranda. 'Oh,' exclaimed our hostess, eyeing me with active disfavour, as she greeted us. '*We always dress* for dinner. Did I forget to tell you?' (Fat lot of good telling you, signalled her eye.) 'Don't you want to get out of uniform sometimes?'

Now was the moment to explain, but this senseless soul would have an equally senseless retort. 'But don't you have more than *one* evening dress?' I did not explain. Irene and I were introduced all round, to Maria Shoemantle, a major's wife and nine males, including my little C.O.

'Now come and powder your noses,' and we followed her along the veranda into a bedroom. She chatted to put these welfare officers at their awkward ease, and Irene and I made all the correct responses.

'Those little curls all over your head'—this specially for me—'they make you look like Bubbles.' An 'unfrooked' one, a sob-sister, a pretty widow, a passionate nun, a battle-axe and now Bubbles! An interesting personality to be a commander's lady!

'Oh, it's so much easier to shampoo, now it's short,' I smiled. But how often had I wished I had not had it cut off, after all. John had been right about the lost Madonna hair-style and the husband overseas. What does one kiss matter? Come on, be a sport . . . how often had I been told that, from the most unlikely sources; from men who would as soon have heaved a brick through a bank window as ask for the odd kiss from a casual woman acquaintance at home. And Private Lee's mates were right, too. Men did consider that married women would be more 'accommodating' with less to risk. Especially with a husband safely out of the way. I was weathering my last months in Dustypore without the sure defences of the first months. A Madonna hair-style; the hazards of drying a widow's tears; the brushing-off tactics of Major Ronald Dover, watchdog in chief; and the companionship of Eleanore, my welfare Siamese twin. Irene could not stand the pace, and said so honestly. No one expected her to. But I was twenty-six, not fifty; Dustypore expected me to keep on turning out just as I had always done. I was unchanged inside, but different on the surface, and in the 'here today, gone tomorrow' atmosphere of army life, men glanced at the surface and decided to chance their luck!

'I go down to Bombay every fortnight, to have mine shampooed and set,' Mrs. Glendint was informing us. 'They're rather good at the Taj Hotel. They *understand* my type of hair. But I suppose you have to do yours almost every day. In *your* job!' Now what the devil did she mean by that? The B.O.R.s and their officers could be lousy enough, but they were *not* lousy. Irene, also shorn, but in a more sophisticated style, carefully avoided my eye. She, and Eleanore before her, had often joked that my beret was oftener on than off, which

was true. I usually forgot I had it on, but I always remembered to throw it on to the bed in the hotel. Elsewhere, with no beds handy to remind me, it stayed put. However, there was a bed here, and I had politely hung my beret on a knob. I wished now I had shaken it first. We rejoined the party.

The mosquitoes sang round us, the white-robed butler with the regimental crest glittering in his snowy turban handed round olives and nuts. I sat, a model of interested attention, bored stiff. The passionate nun of Dustypore was at a very low ebb these days. What was John doing at this very moment? I shut my eyes for a second, to get a better mental picture of him, blue eyes looking down at me with a twinkle. I opened my own, smiling, to find I had slopped some of my cocktail in my lap and Mrs. Glendint was looking at me. It was time I added something to the spate of words all round. I must earn my dinner. The half colonel at my side was discouraging on horses. I looked at his shoulder-flash. ‘

‘Some of your men are keen students of horseflesh,’ I told him.

He faced right round, interested. ‘I shouldn’t have thought it. Unless you mean the Bombay Races?’

‘No, purely horses and their habits. In fact, you’ve several experts.’

The half colonel was delighted to hear it. ‘We’re trying to form a Dustypore Polo Club. We can get the ponies and the players, but we’re short of *syces* [Indian grooms]. D’ye know the names of these men?’

‘I’m sorry . . .’

‘Not at all. The R.S.M. will see to it. I need a dozen.’ I was a sore saint for the B.O.R.s sometimes. Grooming fatigues!

‘Do you hunt?’ The Honourable Captain Somebody or Other had moved over, to lean on the veranda rail beside me. I had specially angled for this seat, to have a rail and not a man on my other side.

‘Hunt?’, Wellington’s officers may have done a bit of fox-hunting as a sideline behind their battlefields, but they had never been stationed at a place called Dustypore. ‘I’m completely foxed,’ I told him frankly and wished he would go away.

Mrs. Glendint rose majestically. She held up a shushing hand.

‘The Brig. now, I think?’ So the Brig. was invited too. We all listened respectfully with her, but unless the great man had developed a growl in the back of his tonsils and could thump his tail hard on the veranda floor, this was not he.

'Quiet, Pongo,' advised his master, and Pongo, a huge beast like a young buffalo, stopped the growling and began to pant instead.

The Honourable Captain Somebody addressed me again.

'The Mess are arranging a moonlight picnic to the Caves. Would you care to come? As'—his voice quivered—'as my partner?' He was a new arrival obviously.

'How wonderful! I should be delighted'—the young fool's knee actually moved to press against mine—'but you see I've already refused your colonel. And every other officer in your mess. Many times.' The Caves were like rabbit-warrens. I had been refusing moonlight visits to them ever since I had arrived in Dustypore. So had Eleanore, though I didn't know about Irene. Then the crestfallen look on his face made me add, smiling, 'Invite me somewhere else. Some other time.'

'Dinner and the cinema tomorrow night,' he said at once. It never pays to be sorry for young officers. I rose thankfully with the others. The Brigadier's car was coming up the drive.

The major's wife was another new arrival in Dustypore, so it began with the soup. 'You must have an interesting job,' she told Irene and me. 'Women have played such an important part in this war. Taking over so much from the men. . . .' She meant well, but the Brig. cut it short. He didn't suffer bores gladly.

'This is delightful soup,' he complimented.

'Tinned,' dimpled his beaming hostess and gave him the actual brand. 'The cook wants to use bones, but they always look awful and so smelly, I can't bear to let him boil them, even.' We were about to have set before us meat which must have come from the same type of carcase as the smelly bones; the thought showed in the faces of the assembled guests. Depression settled heavily.

The Brig. coughed. He rarely went to private dinner-parties, and I was beginning to see why. 'ENSA's been rather good lately?' he volunteered now. The table gratefully fastened on ENSA. The major's wife re-fastened on me.

'Harold tells me you're lecturing to our men on Tuesday afternoon. On welfare in general, I think he said? Now, would you care for me to be on the platform with you? I needn't speak, of course—just thank you, say a few words of appreciation, at the end? A—a regimental touch. To show we're all in this together. We army wives used to do a little families' welfare before the war, but we'll have to do far more now. When we begin to take over from you. Where you've left off,

one might put it?' The whole table had abandoned ENSA, to listen to this. The lecture I proposed to give to her Harold's men was not one at which Harold would wish his wife to be present. The lectures were by way of being an experiment in Dustypore. Sexual rehabilitation was the plainest way of describing the subject-matter. Warriors who had been absentees from married life for years—years spent mostly in hot climates, with outlooks broadened and coarsened by army life—were likely to go home with whetted appetites. Their wives might not understand and marriages might be made or marred in those first few weeks of readjustment. It was my horrid duty to explain a woman's point of view and her possible fastidious reactions to the warriors before they started off for home at all. The wording was carefully vetted beforehand, and I stuck faithfully to my script, but I had no platform, and if I had had a platform, it was no place for majors' wives who talked like patriotic pamphlets. Personally, I hoped that a certain commander would never find out what his wife had to do in the name of Families' Welfare. It was simple, it was clinical, put over with a requisitely detached air; it had to be done, and no man could do it, not even a doctor.

'Stuff and nonsense,' said Maria Shoemantle from her seat on the Brigadier's right. 'It's the Canteen Committee Meeting on Tuesday afternoon, and there's plenty of room on the platform there for army wives interested in the troops' welfare. I'll take you along with me. The troops won't buy the cucumber sandwiches out here. Did they buy them in Aldershot, or did you think up some jiggery-pokery to disguise the taste? We need a new brain on our . . .'

The major's wife was enrolled on the spot and her Harold stopped assaulting his fish with a spoon and went back to an orthodox fork. Small talk rolled smoothly round the table until our hostess signalled the retreat.

We were going on to the Club to dance. In the bedroom the mosquito nets had been lowered and the beds turned down for the night. Maria looked at her moustache in the mirror, almost plucking at the hairs. Irene adjusted her slipper buckle. The major's wife slapped powder on lavishly, peering into her compact mirror, after throwing Maria an indignant glance. Mrs. Glendint tied a chiffon scarf round her hair. Only I was booted and spurred and ready to ride. I lifted my beret off the knob.

Colonel Glendint's pyjamas lay on his pillow, blue stripes on white. John liked more violent striped effects. The nightwear on the other bed was a foam of pink and cream lace. John liked black. Resolutely, I had refused to think about the White

Coolie all the evening, but now that bare uneven floor blotted out these neat twin beds, and those desperately revealing words stood out again from the coarse brown paper. '... I take care, padre, I have always taken care. ...' Drunk and fighting, she had still taken care, to bring no child with British blood into the squalor she herself knew. And accepted.

Mrs. Glendint was at my elbow and I asked, 'Have you any children?'

'No. What a funny question, all at once,' she laughed.

Still with the White Coolie, I heard myself say slowly, 'So you take care, too.' The look on her face made me try to explain. 'It was the beds and everything. After that bare floor.' Her face then brought me back, appalled, to where I was.

Irene smoothed things over. 'You've had a stinker today, Margaret, haven't you? And still thinking about it all. Padre Burke told me to keep an eye on you tonight. He looked like death himself when he came in to see me.'

Mention of the church brought order and respectability back into the conversation. Maria, twanging at one annoying hair on her chin, surveyed me in the mirror. 'I think, and the colonel agrees with me, it's a wonder you keep sane and balanced at all.' At any other time I might have been flattered, but there was something I knew I had still to do for the White Coolie. But I couldn't think what it could possibly be.

We passed out on to the veranda, in good order and full of friendly chat. I found myself alone with my host on the steps. 'Going to drive you over myself,' he explained and then, as he started up the engine, 'It's about one of my sergeants——' I never could understand why some C.O.s took such infinite pains to conceal their genuine concern at their men's troubles from those very same men. Perhaps they felt they would appear 'sloppy'. I promised I would deal faithfully with this sergeant on the morrow.

Any party which embraced the Brigadier of Dustypore was given the very best table on the cooler outside veranda. We seated ourselves and the evening passed. The Honourable Captain discussed our next meeting while we danced. 'No need to wear uniform,' he urged. I supposed not. 'There's something forbidding about women in uniform,' he chuckled. He was raw, all right, if he still thought that. But I agreed, my mind still busy with the White Coolie. What could I possibly do for her now? Even if I managed to trace her parents, it would be cruel to tell them what her life and death had been. I wished I had been able to talk to her and then

again, I was glad I hadn't. And then again, perhaps—but I pushed that thought firmly aside.

'May I?' and the Brig. was offering his arm. Of course, it was my turn now; he had done all his other duty dances. He was an old-fashioned dancer, content to do his three steps forward and a quick half-turn and let the band keep in touch with him. It usually did.

'Something worrying you?' he asked. 'Where's our gay, vivacious Margaret tonight? Are you feeling fit enough?'

'I feel—I feel,' I spoke slowly, 'as if I've been to a funeral.' And then it was all clear. I knew what I still had to do for the White Coolie. 'Now that the plague scare is over, I suppose the padres will be having an official Thanksgiving Sunday?'

'No, nothing out of the ordinary.' He was surprised.

'Would you order them to have one, a big parade with every band playing? Please?' He danced for a few steps in silence. I began to panic a little. Had I put my foot in things completely, asking point-blank like this on a dance-floor?

'You've a special reason for asking, of course?'

'Yes. A very special reason.' He stared over my head, and the other couples gave us a very wide berth. No one bumps a Brigadier on his own home pitch. At last: 'This reason should be interesting, I must insist on hearing it.'

When the band stopped, he clapped a little, not enough to encourage an encore, then gave me his arm back to our table. A very courtly man, our Brigadier. He sat down beside me.

'Does a special church service with bands mean that welfare is at a loss for once to work out its own salvation?'

'No, of course not. This isn't really welfare at all. It's the White Coolie.'

'The white what?'

'The White Coolie. She didn't want anyone to know except the driver and the C. of E. padre. But he told me and he had to tell the Provost Marshal, to get the permit.'

The Brig. stared hard at me for a moment, then he began to count on his fingers. Our hostess gave a faint gasp. I remembered a remark of hers, retailed to me by Eleanore. 'That Glendint woman says she believes you count on your fingers in front of the men, to see if the babies are illegitimate or not.'

The man beside me waited gravely, expectantly, with his fingers spread out. His eyes were very kind—and then it dawned on me. He knew, he had always known, about Irene and Eleanore and me being outside the pale, being looked upon as 'unfrocks'. Always he had been behind us, in solid support.

Even at the Toc H Brains Trust, he had been there, just 'in case'. And now he was counting openly on his fingers. 'Did he know everything that went on in Dustypore? That first night with Ron Dover? Surely he couldn't know about that? . . . the driver, the C. of E. padre, the P.M. and you. That makes four. I think you should make it five.' I hesitated. How could I tell the whole story here—the others could not help overhearing bits.

'Shall we get a breath of air? A stroll among the trees?' he asked and rose.

He did not interrupt once.

' . . . and you can have the trumpets sounded for her on this side. A Memorial Service by her own people. With the blessing she asked for,' I finished up. He did not say yes or no. But as we shook hands, before he left the party, he said, 'This welfare business,' to me instead of good night, and smiled.

Maria said a strange thing, as she, in turn, said good night.

'Leave her,' and she jerked her head towards Mrs. Glendint, 'to me.'

The B.O.R.s had words for it all as they spat and polished on the Saturday night and re-spat and re-polished on the Sunday morning. Irene and I walked to the church, and martial music swelled out from every camp as we passed.

'There's something about Dustypore,' Irene declared. 'You feel anything can happen here. I've even had a very sweet proposal of marriage from an infant years younger than my own son. He was sure the difference in age could be bridged successfully. Experience on my side. Tact on his.' We walked on for a bit. 'Nigel's in Italy. I just hope he's not missing his mother as much as all that. Tact! Don't you ever get sick of your job, Margaret?'

We stood outside the church, as the columns came swinging along. By order of the Brigadier, every camp and depot had sent a detachment, and in Dustypore there were men from every British regiment in India and Burma, in transit. The Military Police were mustered at almost full strength and I guessed why. The Irish Provost Marshal was the only Commanding Officer who knew the real reason for this parade.

The Brigadier entered the church with all his staff.

He read the lesson from Ruth 1. 'Whither thou goest, I will go. . . . Thy people shall be my people. . . .' The White Coolie had gone faithfully into the cleansing flames of the

plague fires. Her dust lay tumbled with the dust of her husband's people, in the deep pits.

. . . and nightly pitch my moving tent
A day's march nearer home

sang the B.O.R.s with glad fervour.

Padre Burke gave his text. 'Let the dead bury their dead.'

That deserted village street and the thin, tortured body, wavering and falling and gallantly struggling up again, in the sunlight . . . would she have known if I had jumped out and held her tightly, just for a moment. . . . 'Let the dead bury their dead.'

Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on;
The night is dark, and I am far from home,
Lead Thou me on.
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.

I was not ever thus, nor pray'd that Thou
Shouldst lead me on;
I loved to choose and see my path; but now
Lead Thou me on.
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will: remember not past years.

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on,
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till
The night is gone,
And with the morn those angel faces smile
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.

The B.O.R. voices died into silence.

' . . . for all those dear to us who have departed from us, not for ever but for this day we call life; for all those who wandered from THEE in life but have found THEE again in death. . . . '

And then it was over.

Dustypore had turned out to do honour to a nameless countrywoman, who had 'gone native'. She had renounced her own faith and her own people, but her new loyalty had endured while disasters crushed her. Only, before the last silence closed round her, she had cried out for a handclasp and a prayer, in the bitter loneliness of her soul.

The bands crashed out triumphant regimental marches to the

steady, marching feet, the steadiest marching feet in the world, the marching feet of the British fighting men.

The hill-tops sent the echoes rolling, rolling round the walls of that alien holy city, to tell them triumphantly that the White Coolie herself had gone home at last.

Chapter 21

'... And Dustypore is changing fast. All the long-service men have just about gone home, for better or for worse. My next-door corporal leaves next week. He sends you his best. New faces, new faces, all the time. A younger generation of B.O.R. surrounds me now. Politically minded most of them and full of what the old country must do for them and bitter about what they call their rights. Mr. Churchill is a proper old b——d, according to these young men. And their welfare troubles are different, too. I've had several who didn't want a month's compassionate leave to go home to give their babies a name; they wanted Legal Aid to help fight any paternity order. And Families' Welfare is no longer a guiding hand; it's got to be a gilded hand, very much gilded! I read that chapter on your Geishas up in Simla but I don't think they can teach me anything. I'm not going to be jealous of any wishy-washy goings-on like that. But I shall kick up a fuss if you expect me to shuffle round in a kimono all day. Kiss yourself for me. . . .'

'... and I can almost watch the British Army changing under my eyes, when I read your letters. The Navy, too, but not so fast, not nearly so fast. Your younger generation are civvies; the war's over and they're still being pushed overseas. It's a legitimate grouse for peacetime conscripts, but they're still your friends the B.O.R.s. . . . Isabel speaks well of Torquay, though Charles doesn't like the place. What about going there for our third honeymoon? You're a glutton for honeymoons. How many more do I have to treat you to, before I can consider myself married and settled? Which brings me to the most important point: what about this repat. of yours? Has anything been fixed yet? If you don't hurry up, I'll be home before you. After years and years at sea, no eager wife waiting on the dock for me, to throw herself into my arms and weep down my neck with joy. I'm going to be the one hanging about on a draughty wharf, ready to throw myself into your arms! And do most of the weeping, too, I expect. There's a

moral in that somewhere. Seriously, though, sweetheart. . . .

'P.S. Your letter about Jeff came aboard before I'd posted this. I'm writing to Eleanore. . . .'

'JOHN DARLING, I've just seen Eleanore off and I'm writing this in the hostel before I catch the train back to Dustypore. She was allowed to come straight to Bombay for repatriation. It didn't take long to settle everything in Chundlibaug—just a week ago, since Jeff died. Her letters have always been so cheery I thought everything was going well with them. He was getting stronger all the time and putting on weight steadily. They had a little one-roomed shack in the hospital compound and she was doing her welfare work round the camps in the daytime while he had his treatment. It was a shock to everybody. They were just sitting on the veranda, after their evening meal, not doing anything much, just talking. Jeff said suddenly, "No regrets, Eleanore! About marrying a wreck like me? I can't expect the Company to give me any sort of a job now. Just sitting at this basket-plaiting stuff. . . ." Eleanore laughed at him—you know that funny little laugh she has—and squeezed his hand tight. "No regrets," she told him. "If you're a wreck, you look a jolly good one to me." It turns chilly suddenly up in Chundlibaug, after the sun goes down, and Eleanore heard Jeff give a little sort of shiver. "Inside for you at once. You're getting cold," but when she touched him, it was all over. Heart failure. Several of the returned prisoners have gone out like that, up in Chundlibaug. Nursed gently back into shape again, but their hearts had been too badly strained for any permanent recovery. A sort of "Made in Japan" hallmark! Eleanore was in uniform, keeping a tight grip on herself to make it easy for everybody else. Oh, John, that crowded repatriation boat! There were fifteen women and infants sharing her cabin, but she was glad, or so she said. Something to keep her busy. All our Jock regiment went home on the same boat with her, so she's amongst friends. I've always thought their adjutant was more than just friendly fond of Eleanore. He's an Englishman, like you! How long ago it seems since she and I laughed over their "Kilts Minus". . . .'

But I couldn't tell even John of those moments when Eleanore had stood beside me, in the glare and heat on the Bombay wharf, just standing together as we always had done, to watch events in Dustypore. This time we stood to watch the Dustypore train shunt in to the platform further along the

docks, and the Jocks and the other B.O.R.s had poured out of it, to come flooding across and line up for orderly embarkation. They had clattered up the gangways, noisy, whistling, cheery, sweating. The last lap home for them.

Colonel McLeod had saluted us as he passed, but the Jock adjutant had waited at the foot of the nearest gangway for Eleanore.

She had been trying to smile, as she turned to me. 'I'll have to go. Remember me to John. I—Margo, I'm taking home—one of your Bundles for Britain . . . a souvenir . . .' But then her lips had begun to tremble badly and her hands had gripped mine hard. 'Margo, how long—before—it becomes—bearable—how long—Margo?' But I couldn't see her face very plainly any more, and I certainly couldn't answer.

Chapter 22

'Margaret, I want to tell you myself, before you go tomorrow. I love you, I fell in love with you almost from the very first moment I saw you, sitting there so anxiously in my office, wondering if I would approve of you and give you an office. You could have asked me for anything after that. They all knew it, except you. Your husband knew it, before he went away, and that last time I saw him he told me, "I hope Margaret stays on in Dustypore under your eye, Colonel. A posting would upset her now. She relies a lot on you, I think." I want to say good-bye to you out here, tonight.'

We were walking under the trees outside the Officers' Club. The same trees under which Ron and I had kissed and under which I had told my Brigadier about the White Coolie. Tonight the officers of Dustypore were giving me a farewell party, but only two of them were old-timers now, like me. The Staff captain, O.C. Gunners, Maria's colonel, O.C. Signals, O.C. R.A.M.C., O.C. R.E.—in fact every C.O. and officer Eleanore and I had known, all had gone. Regiments had gone and regiments had moved in and gone again, in their turn. The permanent camps and depots changed their staffs with monotonous regularity; repatriations swept them all away, within weeks or months of their arrival. Matron, Maria, Mabel Roff, Irene Bannister—every nurse and even every W.A.C.(I) had gone and been replaced and then replaced again. I felt like the Ancient Mariner of Dustypore. Families' Welfare and its sister service had been re-mustered; units closed down or

doubled up to cover wider areas. I was to be repatriated at last and my relief, Gwen Murdoch, would stay here now until Dustypore itself no longer required Families' Welfare. And I should leave behind only two who had known Margaret Michaelis; my Brigadier and my little C.O.

Indian moonlight and the earth still green and fresh from the failing monsoon. I should never walk here again, except in memory.

'It has been a happy partnership, Margaret.'

We paused to stand, just where Ron and I had stood, looking down on Dustypore, with its lights out.

'Very happy. You were my first friend in Dustypore and you're my last, too. You did things for me you didn't have to do. I'll always remember you.' My little C.O.!

'Then——?'

There was no one left here now, to raise their eyebrows if they saw us. It was unlikely he, and I would ever meet again. In a few months, he, too, would be repatriated and fade into the obscurity of a retired Indian Army colonel on pension.

'Yes, if you want . . . and my little C.O. took me in his arms.'

Gwen Murdoch watched me pack the last few things in my canvas hold-all, before the truck arrived.

'What is that?' she asked curiously, as I folded a piece of grey blanket, herringboned in red.

'It's an old-fashioned army-style cholera belt.'

'He must have been midget size, to get that one on. Don't tell me you squeeze into it,' she laughed.

'The owner was midget size. But I loved him a lot. And I've missed him . . . bitterly.' I zipped up the bag. 'He was a little monkey, and he used to come in and wake me up every morning.'

Gwen shivered fastidiously. 'I'm glad he's not here now, then. I can't bear monkeys.'

I walked across for a last look through the bars.

'You're terribly upset at leaving Dustypore, Margaret, aren't you? I can't see why. Everybody you know has gone and you've got a husband waiting for you. Your life is just beginning. *You're* all right.'

I swung round, then.

'So you didn't know,' Gwen said softly. 'I thought everyone in our service knew. About me.' She faced me, squarely. 'I fell in love with a married officer and he went back to his wife. They don't all believe I sent him back.' She pummelled

absently at the bed. 'I didn't, either. I asked for a posting to keep welfare out of any muck, but I hoped,—I left it to him to decide.'

She sauntered out to the veranda. I looked round, once, quickly, then followed her.

'Got a photo handy of this sailor of yours? I looked for it on that chest.' She was grinning. I grinned back.

'Sparrow Newman took a violent dislike to it at sight, so I had to dismantle it and tote it around.' I produced the photo as obediently as any B.O.R.

'He looks worth having and he's no midget! I wouldn't be waiting for the truck, I'd be running to the station in case I missed the train and boat and kept him waiting. Where is he now?'

'Somewhere at sea. He'll be home before me and he's meeting me at Southampton.' For our third honeymoon!

'And you've gone all nostalgic about leaving this dump! Snap out of it! I wanted to be repatriated, too. But the spinsters had to soldier on to let you wives go first. I'll tell you something else. I didn't *want* Dustypore, of all places. The soldier man I'm still in love with will pass through here some time next month. On *his* way home and to his wife. How's that for comedy?' But she didn't want an answer to that from me.

'I'm not really sorry to leave. It's just . . .'

'Memories?'

We were both leaning on the veranda rail when the truck came roaring round the driveway.

'Here's your "boy" and that manager! Make it short and sweet. I'm going to squeeze into the front seat with you, but I'm not coming to the station . . . you can drop me—at *my* office.'

There were two B.O.R.s waiting on *her* veranda!

I remembered as I settled back after waving that Gwen Murdoch had been top of our welfare class in London. She was still our best welfare officer; who else would have bothered to send me off with everything in its proper perspective?

'I envy you, mam.' The driver glanced round at me. 'Going home! The sooner they hand India over to these natives, the better. We can all go home then.'

'There's a little more to it than that. They—may not be quite ready for self-government yet.'

'I should worry! Let them shout the odds among themselves. When they've chucked us out.' Ensign Hamish Hamilton . . . Fusilier O'Flaherty . . . Private Orr . . . the White

Coolie . . . and John NICHOLSON! Were they listening and laughing?

'You'll be part of history,' I said suddenly. 'In the rear-guard of regiments whose history is the history of India. After two hundred and fifty years . . .'

'And b—— history!' he retorted warmly. 'It was sheer murder in them Bombay riots. We was on street patrol, in them bazaars, slow pacing, and a bottle come out of a window, missed me hair parting and smashed on me boots. "Stop that b—— sky gazing," the sergeant yells out at me. "Orders is no b—— reprisals! Can't you dekko them's their harem's quarters up there, your uniformed goat? Women don't aim straight! You're safe as hen . . . get on there . . . steady does it . . ." Steady like hell in me hero's grave crowned with a bottle from the married quarters . . .' The idea tickled him, he laughed uproariously.

Some day, someone will write it—a fitting toast to them, my friends the B.O.R.s and their officers; philosophic, patient and humorous; grouching, swearing and drunken; those uniformed goats; those deathless, undefeatable comics, the British Army in India. From Plassey to Kohima. . . . Steady like hell indeed . . .

I left Dustypore as I had arrived, in a smother of olive-green and khaki; travelling this time, in the regulation repatriation train, in the officers' section, which meant that the wooden board seats were just as hard but we had panes of glass in the windows.

The Brig. came down with his staff, as he sometimes did, to see our consignment off. Each carriage with its forest of waving arms trundled past where he stood, gravely watching.

'See you in Blighty, sir.'

'You can stick India . . .'

'Wot are we takin' them sergeants home for . . .?'

'Nevaire no mo'ah. . . .'

And then the chorus rose triumphant from every throat. The troops had changed but not their anthem. And as he heard it, their Brigadier raised his hand in salute, at last.

Oh, show me the way to go home,
I'm tired and I wanna go to bed;

'Thank you, SIR! Good-bye, Dustypore!'
And in my end was my beginning.

